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'No-one chooses me for anything'

An examination of sixth form selective practices and the shaping of moderate attainers' post-school choosing.

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Awarding institution:
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‘No-one chooses me for anything’
an examination of sixth form selective practices and the
shaping of moderate attainers’ post-school choosing.

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Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

ABSTRACT

Much of the research that deals with university choosing focuses on high attaining state school students accessing ‘elite’ universities. In contrast, this thesis is concerned with the experiences of the discrete – and hitherto under-researched – group of socially and academically diverse, moderately attaining students who form the majority of many school sixth forms.

The policy background to the study is a shift in UK higher education policy discourse from the inclusivity of ‘widening participation’ to the exclusivity of ‘fair access’ which reflects a more pronounced policy focus on high attaining students and their university aspirations. The policy of fair access, including the requirement on schools to submit annual destination data of students accessing ‘top third’ universities, and a competitive sixth form market combine to put enormous pressures on schools. Some appear to have responded to these pressures by differentiating the support provided to students for their Higher Education (HE) or other, post-school choices.

An ethnographic study of three different school sixth forms was used to explore the support for post-school choosing offered to a range of academically attaining sixth formers, with a particular focus on moderate attainers. Forty-eight students were tracked through the sixth forms of a multi-ethnic comprehensive, a Church of England academy and an independent selective boys’ school, to their post-school destinations. Structured and semi-structured interviews were conducted with each student over the course of eighteen months in order to gain insights into the support for the HE choice and applications process, and support for non-HE choices, offered in each school. Interviews were also carried out with three heads of sixth form, a head of careers, a careers advisor, sixth form tutors, and an admissions tutor at a Russell Group university. In each school, participant observation was carried out of sixth form assemblies, higher education and/or careers events, form periods and lessons. In addition, informal interviews were conducted with university admissions administrators, student ambassadors, FE college representatives and parents. The Bourdieusian concepts of institutional habitus (Reay, 1998; Reay, David and Ball, 2005) and teacher habitus (Oliver and Kettley, 2010) and social and cultural capital were employed to help illuminate school practices, teachers’ approaches to

supporting different groups of students, and students' experiences of post-school choosing.

Support for the HE process in the two state schools was differentiated in a myriad of formal and informal ways that overwhelmingly disadvantaged moderate attainers with their post-school choosing. The influence of a dominant fair access policy, coupled with the marketing potential of students accessing Russell Group universities meant that the schools invested disproportionately in high attainers. I suggest that the system of support for the HE process found in the independent school, which avoided an overreliance on the form tutor, was a fairer way of distributing resources.

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CONTENTS		
ABSTRACT	2
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS		4
CONTENTS	5
CHAPTER 1	BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY	13
	Introduction.....	13
	Moderate attainers.....	14
	The ‘HE process’.....	15
	Selective practices.....	16
	Why research moderate attaining sixth formers now?.....	16
	The influence of fair access.....	17
	Moderate attainers form the majority	19
	Moderate attainers and their diverse aspirations	19
	Thesis structure	20
CHAPTER 2	A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE	24
	Introduction	24
	The historical background – progression to university and the moderate attainer.....	24
	Moderately attaining sixth formers in a stratified system.....	27
	Grouping ‘by ability’.....	28
	Grouping ‘by ability’ to maximise returns	28
	Grouping ‘by ability’ - practices and consequences.....	30
	Teacher expectations.....	31
	Pedagogic practice.....	32
	Average, middle and moderate attainers.....	33
	The ‘ordinary’ student.....	35
	Policy as discourse	37

	Policy influences: school practices and their impact on moderately attaining sixth formers.....	39
	The impact of the fair access policy	39
	<i>Subject choice – ‘facilitating’, ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ subjects</i>	40
	<i>The personal statement</i>	43
	<i>Careers advice</i>	44
	The cost of going to ‘uni’.....	46
	The influence of habitus on HE choosing	47
	Institutional habitus.....	49
	Familial habitus.....	50
	<i>Cultural capital</i>	52
	Conclusion	53
CHAPTER 3	METHODOLOGY	57
	Introduction	57
	Research Questions	57
	Why ethnography?	58
	Introduction to the field.....	60
	My schools – their socio-economic and academic contexts.....	60
	<i>Hallingford</i>	61
	<i>St John’s</i>	63
	<i>Parklands</i>	64
	<i>Reasons for including Parklands</i>	67
	Accessing my schools.....	67
	Safeguarding	68
	Hallingford.....	69
	St John’s.....	71
	Parklands	72
	Selecting my student samples.....	72
	Hallingford.....	74
	St John’s.....	76

	<i>Missing Black girls</i>	76
	<i>Gender imbalance</i>	77
	Parklands	78
	Selecting my teacher samples.....	80
	Hallingford.....	80
	St John's.....	81
	Parklands	82
	Data collection	83
	Interviewing.....	83
	<i>My position as interviewer</i>	83
	<i>Interviewing students</i>	84
	<i>Interviewing teachers</i>	86
	<i>Interviewing admission tutors and other HE/FE representatives</i>	87
	Transcribing and analysis of interviews.....	88
	<i>Initial coding</i>	88
	<i>Critical engagement with the 'text'</i>	89
	<i>Key themes and sensitising concepts</i>	90
	Observation.....	92
	Analysis of documents.....	94
	Ethical considerations	97
	Informed consent.....	97
	Conclusion.....	100
	INTRODUCING THE STUDENT PARTICIPANTS	103
CHAPTER 4	FORMAL AND INFORMAL SIXTH FORM SELECTIVE PRACTICES	118
	Introduction	119
	St John's	119
	Entry criteria.....	119
	'It's all about class'.....	121

	Sixth Form Open Evening	123
	The importance of being ‘recognised’	125
	Subject choice.....	129
	<i>‘Cooled out’ and ‘warmed up’</i>	130
	Teacher problems.....	132
	Gaming the league tables?	136
	Hallingford.....	137
	Entry Criteria.....	137
	Subject choice.....	138
	Teacher problems.....	140
	Testing Hallingford’s comprehensive ethos.....	143
	Parklands.....	145
	Selection and ‘weeding out’	145
	UCAS preparation days	146
	Hallingford.....	147
	St John’s.....	149
	Parklands.....	150
	Getting kids into ‘uni’ – ‘Who’s it all for?’	150
	Concluding thoughts	153
CHAPTER 5	DIFFERENTIATED SUPPORT FOR HE CHOOSING.....	156
	Introduction.....	156
	The HE discourse at Hallingford.....	157
	Sixth form displays.....	157
	The Higher Education Fair.....	157
	Support for UCAS applications.....	158
	Oxbridge – ‘cherry picking’ and ‘grooming’	159
	Differentiated support – student observations.....	161
	<i>Differentiated support and ‘friendship’</i>	164
	<i>Support for ‘averagey’ HE choices</i>	166
	Gatekeepers or facilitators - the influence of teacher habitus.....	168

	<i>Types of gatekeeping.....</i>	171
	Form tutors on Hallingford's dominant discourse.....	172
	The significance of Russell Group universities to moderate attainers.....	176
	<i>When 'choice' means decision-making.....</i>	177
	The HE discourse at St John's	178
	'Life Skills' form periods.....	179
	The Oxbridge Group.....	180
	St John's sixth form tutors' perspectives.....	184
	Hallingford and St John's moderate attainers - luke warm knowledge.....	187
	Support for the HE process at Parklands.....	190
	Concluding thoughts.....	193
CHAPTER 6	DIFFERENTIATED SUPPORT FOR THE PERSONAL STATEMENT.	196
	Introduction.....	196
	Admissions tutors' perspectives on the personal statement	197
	Support for writing the personal statement - who gets what	197
	Hallingford.....	198
	<i>'Too busy' for moderate attainers.....</i>	198
	<i>Peer support.....</i>	201
	<i>Facilitating Teachers.....</i>	203
	St John's.....	206
	<i>'Mollycoddled' high attainers.....</i>	206
	<i>'We're still waiting...'</i>	209
	<i>The value of a university educated parent.....</i>	211
	Support for Parklands' moderate attainers.....	215
	Preparation for Oxbridge – a comparison of three schools.....	216
	Hallingford – let down by the 'exam factory'	216
	St John's – 'nothing like' the Cambridge interview.....	217
	Parklands – 'He prepared me brilliantly'	218
	Senior teachers' perspectives.....	220
	St John's	220

	Hallingford.....	21
	Parklands	222
	Concluding thoughts.....	223
CHAPTER 7	SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS WHO CHOOSE ALTERNATIVES TO HE.....	227
	Introduction	227
	Reasons for choosing an alternative to HE.....	228
	Year 12 school leavers.....	230
	‘No-one's interested in kids like us’.....	231
	The ‘push’ to go to ‘uni’.....	233
	Coping strategies.....	235
	‘Passing’ as an HE applicant.....	237
	Finding alternatives – the influence of social capital.....	238
	Alternatives to HE – formal provision.....	242
	Hallingford.....	243
	<i>The Higher Apprenticeship Fair</i>	243
	<i>Support for apprenticeship-seekers</i>	244
	<i>Beyond the sovereignty of Hallingford's institutional habitus</i>	245
	St John’s.....	247
	<i>Careers advice</i>	247
	<i>External providers</i>	248
	The ‘stigma’ of college.....	250
	Entrepreneurial form tutors.....	250
	St John’s.....	251
	Hallingford.....	253
	Concluding thoughts.....	255
CHAPTER 8	CONCLUSION.....	258
	An overview of the study.....	258
	Differentiation in sixth form.....	259

	Subject choice - tests, ‘cooling out’ and teacher allocation.....	259
	Support for HE applicants.....	261
	<i>A lack of formal support for moderate attainers.....</i>	261
	<i>Oxbridge applicants prioritised.....</i>	263
	<i>The personal statement – a key indicator of perceived status.....</i>	265
	The influence of teacher habitus – gatekeepers and facilitators	267
	The lack of formal support for non-conformers.....	271
	The experience of being a moderate attainer.....	272
	Students’ experiences of the HE discourses of their schools.....	273
	Concluding thoughts.....	277
	Further research.....	279
	BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	282
	APPENDICES.....	297
A	An explanation of ‘elite’, ‘Russell Group’ and ‘new’ universities	298
B	An explanation of Level 3 Qualifications	301
C	Definitions of Social Class	304
D	The UCAS application process.....	305
E	Original Research Questions	307
F	Safeguarding at St John’s and Parklands.....	308
G	Aide Memoires for research participant interviews.....	310
H	Descriptive and analytic codes.....	313
I	Observational data (informal).....	321
J	Field Note – ‘Mr Collins’.....	323
K	School documents analysed (detailed)	325
L	Ethical Approval letter.....	328
M	Research participants’ information sheets and consent forms.....	330
N	LSE’s ‘Pathways to Law’ programme.....	340
O	Hallingford’s Russell Group badge.....	342
P	St John’s ‘Attainment and Aspirations’ careers research page.....	343

Q	Typology of student responses to schools' HE discourses – breakdown by school	345
LIST OF TABLES		
Table 1	Attainment groupings by school.....	74
Table 2	Hallingford - make up of student sample.....	75
Table 3	St John's - make up of student sample.....	78
Table 4	Parklands - make up of student sample.....	79
Table 5	Hallingford staff participants	81
Table 6	St John's staff participants	82
Table 7	Parklands staff participants	83
Table 8	Descriptive and analytic codes	313
Table 9	Typology of student responses to schools' HE discourses.....	91
Table 10	Observational data (formal)	93
Table 11	Observational data (informal)	321
Table 12	School documents analysed.....	96
Table 13	School documents analysed (detailed).....	325
Table 14	Hallingford HE applicants and their final destinations.....	104
Table 15	St John's HE applicants and their final destinations.....	108
Table 16	Parklands HE applicants and their final destinations.....	111
Table 17	Hallingford non-conformers and their post-school destinations.....	113
Table 18	St John's non-conformers and their post-school destinations.....	115
Table 19	Hallingford's hierarchy of form groups.....	138
Table 20	Hallingford teachers - educational background and position on school's HE discourse.....	175
Table 21	St John's teachers - educational background and position on school's HE discourse.....	186
Table 22	Parklands teachers - educational background and position on school's HE discourse.....	192
Table 23	Typology of student responses to schools' HE discourses – breakdown by school.....	345

CHAPTER 1

Background to the study

Introduction

The study arose from an insight gained while researching for a Master's thesis on the role of 'institutional habitus' (Reay 1998; Reay, David and Ball, 2005) in the social construction of students' Higher Education (HE) choices (Burgess, 2013). The practices and processes of the two state schools where I conducted most of my research appeared 'to se(t) parameters around the possible' (Reay et al, 2005, p.53) in relation to students' HE aspirations. High attaining GCSE students were selected and groomed for progression to 'elite' universities. However, while heads of sixth form spoke of encouraging 'aspiration' in other students, they insisted students made 'realistic' HE choices. I argued that more could be done to help a broader range of students to aspire to 'elite' universities.¹ During my research it also became clear that students applying to non-Russell Group universities were especially disadvantaged by an uneven distribution of resources. I subsequently became interested in the extent to which sixth form selective practices might influence students' HE choices. During this time, my interest shifted from students who aspired to 'elite' universities, to students of middling academic attainment who aspired to less selective universities. These HE applicants, I felt, were most overlooked and potentially most disadvantaged when it came to their HE choosing. I therefore decided that this group would be the focus of my research into HE choosing. Three school sixth forms were chosen for the comparisons I might make. They comprised Hallingford, a mixed, multi-ethnic comprehensive, St John's, a Church of England Academy and Parklands, a single sex, selective independent school. In spite of the very different socio-economic profiles of their student populations, all three schools had in common with many English schools the pride they took in the numbers of students who progressed to Russell Groups universities.

¹ Generally, but not necessarily, 'elite' is used in the fair access discourse to mean 'Russell Group' universities. However, 'elite' may also be used specifically to mean the most prestigious and most selective, 'top' Russell Group universities. Oxford, Cambridge, Durham and Imperial were considered 'elite' institutions by all three schools where I conducted my research. See Appendix A for a fuller explanation of university types.

Initially, middle attainers whose post-school destinations included alternatives to HE were not included in my study. However, early in my research, I found that more students than I had anticipated expressed interest in alternatives to HE. It became clear that if I wanted to explore the full impact of any selective practices on students' post-school choosing, this group would need to be included.

Moderate attainers

The focus of my research were students who attained sufficiently at GCSE to enter most school sixth forms and to aspire to HE, but whose attainment suggested they were unlikely to access Russell Group universities.² Such students make up the majority of most non-selective state school sixth forms. The categories 'moderately attaining' and 'moderate attainers' evolved as I struggled to find a suitable term for students whose attainment covered a broad range of 'middling' GCSE attainment. For the purposes of this study, I considered higher end moderate GCSE attainment to be mostly As and Bs. Students attaining such grades might aspire to less selective Russell Group and longer established, 'good' universities.³ I considered lower end moderate attainment to consist mostly of Bs and Cs.⁴ In the two state schools where I conducted my research, casual references were made to students of moderate attainment as 'B' students. I also came across terms which suggested some teachers considered moderate attainment to be something insubstantial, or colourless. In one school, a teacher called this group 'our Ghosts'. In another school, a teacher called middle attainers 'the Greys'. In my independent school, Parklands, six A*s at GCSE is average and Cs are uncommon. A number of Bs at GCSE qualifies as low achievement. 'Low achieving' Parklands students were described by one form tutor as 'my simple but lovelies' and by another, as 'nil by mouth'.⁵ Irrespective of school type, 'high attainers' were referred to by teachers as 'able', 'bright' and/or 'high flyers'. High attainers were also referred to as the 'elites' by Hallingford's Head of Sixth Form. Moderate attainers in both state schools typically referred to themselves

² My study was of school sixth forms and did not include sixth form colleges. In Chapter 3, I explain my reasons for researching school sixth forms and my choice of schools.

³ The term 'good' university was used by many teachers and some students in my study to describe an established (pre-1992), non-Russell Group university. See Appendix A.

⁴ My concepts of lower and higher end moderate attainment are heuristic. In my Literature Review, I critically examine Gayle, Murray and Connelly's (2014) attempts to categorise 'middling' attainment.

⁵ Having only heard the term 'nil by mouth' in reference to patients about to go into surgery or who were seriously ill, I asked this teacher what he meant. He replied, 'You know, *the lights are on but nobody's home*'.

as ‘us B kids’ and their attainment as being a type of ‘average’. Many described their high attaining peers as ‘smart’, and some referred to them as ‘elites’. Unlike many of their teachers, high attaining student participants avoided labelling their moderately attaining peers. Initially, I used the term ‘B’ student for sixth formers who aspired to HE but who were not deemed high attainers by their school. I used this term privately, and with some affection. However, I was uncomfortable with the term ‘B’ student because it defines moderate attainers in relation to A students, rather than describing them in terms of their own qualities.

The moderately attaining students who form the main focus of this study had a wide range of middling attainment. When I embarked on my research, and throughout the period that I tracked students through their sixth form, five A/A*s at GCSE classified as ‘high attaining’ and was the minimum requirement to be eligible for summer schools and taster courses run by The Sutton Trust and ‘elite’ universities. I used the same criteria to classify ‘high attaining’ students for this study. The strength of the Government’s fair access to ‘elite’ universities policy meant a high premium was placed by schools on ‘high attaining’ students and their access to ‘elite’ universities. In the two state schools where I conducted research, the formal and informal selective practices I encountered were designed to classify and sort students, with ‘high attaining’ students selected for Russell Group universities, and especially Oxbridge. Students who attained below the threshold of five GCSE A*/As were rarely selected for the types of enhanced support for HE choosing available to high attainers. ‘Moderately attaining’ and ‘moderate attainers’ are therefore terms which describe a very broad range of academic ability. Moderate attainers aspired to a wide range of HE institutions (HEIs) but were unlikely to access ‘elite’ universities. All the same, some higher end moderate attainers accessed Russell Group institutions.

The ‘HE process’

In my study I refer to the ‘HE process’. By this I mean to include both the ways in which students research and choose their universities, as well as the making of their University and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) applications. Much of the existing literature refers to ‘HE choosing’ without distinguishing between choosing a university and applying. In the two state schools which form the focus of this study,

a combination of formal and informal selective practices were employed by schools for both parts of the HE process. Most evident was the practice of ‘cherry picking’ highest attainers for Oxbridge. In both schools, Oxbridge applicants benefited from higher levels of support for their UCAS applications than all other HE applicants; this was especially the case with the drafting of students’ personal statements, a key part of the UCAS application. Only one state school moderate attainer described receiving advice from a teacher on her university choices and most described struggling to access support from teachers for the drafting of their personal statements.

Selective practices

New Labour’s commitment to university expansion and cohort diversity resulted in a number of ‘widening participation’ policies, including the establishment of the Office for Fair Access (Kettley, 2007, p. 340). However, the 2010 Conservative-led Coalition brought about a policy shift from ‘widening participation’ to all types of HEIs, to the pursuit of ‘fair access’ to ‘elite’ universities which, as Wyness (2017) describes, remains ‘high on the policy agenda’ (p.3). In the state schools where I conducted research, a focus on high attaining students was consistent with the fair access policy. A variety of formal and informal selective processes resulted in differentiated levels of support for different attainment groups for their HE or non-HE choosing, and especially for students’ UCAS applications. For the purposes of my research, I considered a selective practice to exist wherever there was evidence that support for students’ post-school choosing was differentiated by attainment, wherever there was any form of exclusion on the basis of attainment, or wherever an uneven distribution of resources advantaged one group over another. I also considered evidence of informal practices to exist wherever moderate attainers felt discriminated against because of their attainment, or wherever high attaining students were given preferential treatment.

Why research moderately attaining sixth formers now?

The expansion of HE since 2000, coupled with the rise in school leaving age in 2015 to 18, has led to increasing numbers of students in post-16 education and a rise in

moderately attaining students accessing HE.⁶ Competition is fuelled by Ofsted ratings and government and media school league tables. In this context, a school sixth form's success is represented by schools' 'destinations data' with the focus on the number of A*/As attained at A level and the number of students accessing 'top third' (most selective) universities. The annual publication of such data points to the Department for Education's (DfE) belief that such 'statistics demonstrate the gulf between the schools and colleges which deliver for their students - and those which do not' (DfE, 2013). The pressure on schools to meet both the demands of a competitive sixth form market and the fair access policy is arguably contributing to the creation of a new 'economy of student worth' (Ball, Maguire and Macrae, 1998), within which the needs of higher attaining sixth formers are privileged because they generate more 'value' for schools than moderate attainers. At both the state schools where I conducted research, a disproportionate amount of resources was invested in Oxbridge applicants. In addition, at St John's academy and selective independent school Parklands, low attaining AS level students were 'constructively dismissed' (Parklands moderate attainer) at the end of year 12. The practice of 'weeding out' low attaining year 12 students first came to the attention of the media when it was discovered that an East London sixth form academy was ejecting students who attained below three Cs at AS level (Scott, 2014). Media interest was reignited in August 2017 when it was found that many state school sixth forms under 'pressure to deliver results' (Weale and Fishwick, 2017) were refusing to allow low attaining AS students to progress to year 13 (see also Grierson, 2017; Weale, 2017a, 2017b). The existence of such sixth form selective practices raises questions about what other types of selective practices may exist, and their impact on the educational experiences and post-school aspirations of moderate attainers. It would seem especially important to research moderate attainers for the following reasons.

The influence of fair access

Firstly, the experiences of moderately attaining school sixth formers in the current policy context of fair access are under-researched. The recent rise in the school leaving age (ROSLA) has brought many more 'ordinary' and/or moderately attaining sixth formers into school sixth forms. However, academic interest remains primarily

⁶ See Curnock Crook's foreword to UCAS's End of Year Report 2016, p.2.

focused on the efficacy of the fair access policy and the HE destinations of high attaining students.

First set up in 2004, the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) has only ever been able to give guidance and make recommendations on university access agreements (see Boliver, 2013). OFFA's tentativeness towards what constitutes fair access may be detected in the wording which appears in a 'glossary of terms' on OFFA's newly designed website. The definition for fair access opens by stating the term means 'equality of opportunity'. It goes on to say that

[fair access] is often used with reference to the uneven distribution of under-represented students between universities and colleges across the higher education sector, in particular in referring to the universities with the most selective overall entry requirements where the pool of applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds is relatively small.

(OFFA website)

Phrases such as 'is often used' and 'in particular' highlight OFFA's powerlessness over how others employ the term 'fair access', and how fair access is applied. As Boliver (2013) points out, universities are not accountable to OFFA, and any scrutiny or regulation of university admissions is 'beyond the remit of' OFFA (Boliver 2013, p.347). In their examination of policy enactment in secondary schools, Braun, Maguire and Ball (2010) highlight ways in which schools may 'interpret' or 'translate' policy. It is possible that the imprecision of the definition of fair access legitimises the looseness with which schools to translate the policy into practices which focus on the university applications of high attaining students, whether or not students are from 'disadvantaged backgrounds'.

The focus on high attaining sixth formers at the expense of other groups, and especially in relation to their post-school aspirations, is not a new phenomenon (see Reay, 1998; Reay et al, 2005). However, since Reay, David and Ball's (2005) research, the growth in the sixth form market has brought increasing competition between school sixth forms. Annual figures for students who successfully access Russell Group universities, and especially Oxbridge, serve as valuable marketing for many school sixth forms, and are essential for attracting students. At the same time, the expansion of HE and the recent ROSLA mean most school sixth forms are

funded by students who comprise Brown's (1987) 'invisible majority' of students who are neither 'high flyers' nor low attainers.

Moderate attainers form the majority

Moderate attainers also deserve our attention because they form the majority of most school sixth forms. The amount of interest in the efficacy of the fair access policy and the university destinations of high attaining, state educated students would seem to belie this fact. Only a relatively small number of students access 'top third' universities. Nonetheless, recent sixth form accountability measures, which include a policy focus on encouraging 'facilitating' (traditional) A level subjects and the attainment of 'at least AAB' (DfE 2017a, p.12), is likely to add further pressure on schools to attract high attainers to their sixth form, and to focus on the HE aspirations of this group.⁷ Even before these new accountability measures were introduced, Pam Tatlow, Chief Executive of Million Plus, the Association for Modern Universities in the UK, described sixth form performance measures with their emphasis on numbers who progress to 'elite' universities, as 'crude and reductive' (Scott, 2016, np). She added that such measures 'undervalu[e] the achievements of the overwhelming majority of students' and the universities to which they progress' (ibid). Tatlow's comments would seem to confirm the value of research which illuminates the impact of HE policy, accountability and performance measures on moderately attaining students and their HE aspirations; in particular, how policy is translated into school practices which give rise to the 'rationing' of sixth form resources (Braun et al, 2010; Gillborn and Youdell, 2000). Importantly, a better understanding of the experiences of moderate attainers promises to illuminate the quality and types of support on offer to sixth formers more generally, especially in the context of an increasingly competitive sixth form market.

Moderate attainers and their diverse aspirations

Moderately attaining sixth formers and their post-school aspirations also deserve our attention because of their sheer diversity. Sandwiched between the smaller, more distinct groups of high and low attainers, moderately attaining students do not

⁷ I discuss facilitating subjects in more detail in Chapter 2. See also Appendix B.

comprise a homogenous group.⁸ Consequently, such students aspire to a wide range of universities, or seek alternatives to HE. In the school sixth forms which formed the focus of this research, support for post-school choosing was based on the assumption that all students would progress to HE. However, in the relatively short time between completing my Master's and embarking on my doctoral research, there was a noticeable shift in attitude towards HE among working class moderate attainers, with some questioning the wisdom of progressing to university.⁹ A small group of my participants described having graduate brothers and sisters who were under-employed or unemployed, and in debt, and this made them wary of HE as a post-school choice. Two students at selective independent school Parklands, expressed an interest in alternatives to the options favoured by the strong academic discourse of their school's sixth form. The discovery of moderate attainers whose aspirations did not conform to those assumed by the HE discourse of their schools led me to broaden my original research focus. I wanted to consider how, with what resources and with what success, non-conformers were able to pursue alternatives to HE.

Above all, school sixth form moderate attainers deserve our attention because wherever school practices give rise to the unequal distribution of resources and fail to recognise the particular needs of any one group, a social injustice is perpetrated. To examine any practice which appears to marginalise the needs and aspirations of moderate attainers is to go some way towards addressing a social injustice suffered by many school sixth form students.

Thesis structure

The aim of this first chapter has been to set out the policy background to my thesis and to introduce and justify my focus on moderately attaining sixth formers. I have also outlined key influences on sixth form practices and processes. In the following chapters, I examine sixth form selective practices, how they operate, and their impact on students. I argue that they risk disadvantaging moderate attainers during the HE process and when making other post-school choices.

⁸ Only one of the state sixth forms where I conducted my doctoral research, Hallingford, could be described as having a proportion of lower attaining sixth formers. Such students studied for BTECs. Some moderate attainers who took part in this research also studied BTECs.

⁹ See Appendix C for definitions of social class.

In Chapter 2, I review the literature which proved most useful for putting my study of selective practices and students' HE choosing into educational and policy context. I start with a brief history of the expansion of HE and then discuss the literature which helped to inform my analysis of selective practices at sixth form level. In particular, Gillborn and Youdell's (2000) concept of 'rationing' of GCSE resources and other key studies of sorting 'by ability' at GCSE. Bourdieu's theoretical framework was key to my analytical approach. In designing my research, I drew in particular on Reay (1998) and Reay et al's (2005) influence of institutional and familial habitus and Oliver and Kettley's (2010) concept of teacher habitus on students' HE choosing. In addition, I discuss Boliver's (2011, 2013) important work on fair access and the body of work by Ball, Reay and David (2002a), Ball, Davies, David and Reay (2002b) and Archer, Hutchings and Ross (2003) on the impact of New Labour's widening participation policy on under-represented groups. I also include in this chapter a brief outline of the literature on the current policy on careers advice and recent findings on aversion to student debt (Callender and Mason, 2017).

In Chapter 3, I present my methodology. I explain my reliance on Willis and Trondman's (2000) *Manifesto for Ethnography* to guide the range of methods I used to record and present the 'nitty gritty' of the everyday life (Willis and Trondman, 2000, p.11) in my three schools. I introduce the field with a description of the socio-economic contexts of each my schools. I explain how I gained access and discuss issues with 'gatekeepers', and how I chose my research participants. I discuss my choice of methods and how I recorded and analysed my data. Finally, I discuss the ethical considerations of my research.

Chapters 4-7 represent the heart of my thesis. In these chapters, I analyse and present my findings on formal and informal selective practices, especially in state schools Hallingford and St John's, and show how these impact on the delivery of support for students' HE and non-HE choices.

In Chapter 4, I outline and analyse the different types of formal and informal selection found in my three sixth forms. My focus is the ways in which these practices disadvantage moderate attainers. I argue that types of differentiation, exclusion and discrimination are all types of 'selection'. I explain the entry criteria for each of my schools. Based on Hallingford and St John's moderate attainers '

accounts, I discuss some of ways in which students appeared to be steered towards some subjects and ‘cooled out’ of others. I also discuss the allocation of teachers to ‘soft’ and/or vocational subjects and moderately attaining students’ experiences of teachers’ discriminatory conduct. By way of introducing Chapters 5 and 6 on how support is delivered for the HE process, I outline the UCAS preparation day (UCAS days) held in each of my three schools at the end of year 12, and show how Hallingford and St John’s start to formally differentiate levels of support for differently attaining groups during their UCAS days. My final section presents students’ insights into why their schools ‘push’ university and the reasons for practices which privilege high attainers and their HE aspirations.

In Chapter 5, I examine the formal and informal ways in which support is allocated for HE choosing, with a particular focus on Hallingford and St John’s. I discuss the lack of formal support for Hallingford’s moderate attainers and the prevalence of ‘informal cultures of advice’ (Oliver and Kettley, 2010) for high attainers’ HE applications. I explain the formal organisation of support for the HE process at St John’s, and how this is differentiated through ‘Life Skills’ and ‘Oxbridge Group’ form groups. I examine the influence of teacher habitus and argue that teachers may act as ‘facilitators’ or ‘gatekeepers’ (Oliver and Kettley, 2010) for students’ HE choosing. I present the experiences of a small number of moderate attainers helped by three ‘exceptional’ Hallingford teachers who acted as facilitators for their HE applications. I offer a comparison of Parklands’ system of support for students’ HE choosing and UCAS applications which avoided an over-reliance on a single teacher.

In Chapter 6, I focus on how support is allocated for the drafting of students’ personal statements. A key part of the UCAS application, I explain that the personal statement is the area of the HE process where levels of support were most sharply differentiated for differently attaining groups. I discuss moderate attainers’ difficulties in getting help with the drafting of their personal statements and compare this with the extensive support given to Oxbridge applicants. I argue that two ‘exceptional’ Hallingford teachers who helped moderate attainers with the drafting of their personal statements ensured a more socially just approach to supporting differently attaining students. By way of developing my discussion on institutional and teacher habitus, I examine preparation for the Oxbridge interview in my three

schools. I raise questions about the disproportionate investment in Hallingford and St John's Oxbridge applicants when returns are so small.

In Chapter 7, I discuss the experiences of Hallingford and St John's moderately attaining sixth formers who did not conform to HE discourses of their schools. I examine some of the coping strategies employed by 'non-conformers' in schools which 'push' university. I show how a lack of information on alternatives to university, especially at Hallingford, meant non-conformers sought advice and guidance from family and social networks. I discuss the influence of the teacher habitus of four 'entrepreneurial' form tutors who were especially motivated to support non-conformers with their post-school choosing.

Chapter 8 concludes my thesis. In this chapter, I present my key findings on formal and informal selective practices in relation to students' subject choices and the different ways in which support for students' post-school choosing was differentiated for differently attaining students, and especially with regard to the drafting of students' personal statement. I then go on to discuss the importance to my study of findings on the influence of teacher habitus and teachers who acted as 'gatekeepers' and 'facilitators' for moderate attainers' HE applications. I highlight the lack of careers advice for sixth formers in my two state schools and how this most disadvantaged those moderate attainers who sought alternatives to HE. Finally, I reflect on how moderate attainers experienced their journey through sixth form and the levels of support for their post-school choosing. I conclude with suggestions for further research.

CHAPTER 2

A review of the literature

Introduction

Historically, students of middling or moderate attainment have excited little interest among researchers. The current policy focus on high attainers, and especially the policy of fair access to ‘elite’ universities, means research and media attention is largely trained on the small percentage of state school students who access the most prestigious universities. In contrast, the ways in which sixth form selective practices impact on the educational experiences of moderate attainers and their HE aspirations is an under-researched area. While the focus of my research was chiefly concerned with moderate attainers who aspired to HE, much of what follows applies equally to moderately attaining sixth formers who seek alternatives to HE.

I open this chapter with an overview of the historical background to the educational reforms of the 1960s which allowed many more students to access a sixth form education and HE. My chapter then falls roughly into three parts. In my first section, I review the research on selective practices in schools. I also review the small body of work on ‘ordinary’ school pupils which was important for sensitising me to the educational experiences of moderate attainers, and the tendency of schools to overlook ‘unspectacular’ attainment.

I then consider policies concerned with access to HE which shape the organisation and practices of school sixth forms, in particular the dominance of the policy of fair access to ‘elite’ universities. In my final section, I review some of the key empirical literature which helped to inform the design of my own study. In particular, I discuss the influence of institutional, teacher and familial habitus on students’ post-school choices.

The historical background – progression to university and the moderate attainer

Before comprehensivisation and the university expansion of the 1960s, the chances of a working-class, moderately attaining student progressing to university were slim.

Access to sixth form education and cost of university - competition for state, municipal and county scholarships was stiff and local authority assistance 'patchy and inconsistent' (Dyhouse, 2007, np) - meant universities were dominated by the middle classes. Little and Westergaard's (1964) study of 'educational opportunity' in the 1950s showed that a middle-class child's chances of accessing university 'were twenty-five to thirty times higher at the stage of admission' than those of a child from an unskilled working-class background (p.303). Just 4% of the entire school population in England and Wales progressed to university by 1958 (Little and Westergaard, 1964, p.303). The 1963 Robbins Report was instrumental in opening up access to university. The 'assumed axiom' that higher education should be available for all who 'qualified by ability and attainment' (Robbins 1963, p.8), coupled with the implementation of the Anderson Committee's 1960 recommendations for means-tested grants and payment of fees, saw a major growth in the number of UK university students. In 1960, 22,426 students obtained a university degree. By 1970 this number had risen to 51,189 (Bolton, 2012).

Instrumental to loosening the middle-class grip on school sixth forms and progression to Higher Education were two interlinked factors. First, was the expansion of universities. This came in the shape of a binary system of HE made up of universities and polytechnics. Although some argued that the binary system 'institutionalized a division between academic knowledge and vocational competence', others felt polytechnics, with their vocational degree courses, democratised higher education (Ross, 2003, p.64). The second factor that did much to encourage greater numbers progressing to sixth form and subsequently to HE, was Labour's Circular 10/65 encouraging education authorities to convert all secondary schools to comprehensives. The 'steep improvements' in attainment in urban areas where 'selection and creaming' were being reduced suggested comprehensive schooling succeeded in raising the academic attainment of children from lower socio-economic groups (McPherson and Willms, 1987, p.528). Importantly, 'all through' comprehensive schools offered both vocational qualifications and the academic examinations necessary to access university. Although many working-class children still chose to leave school at 16, a sixth form education and university was now more possible. In England alone, the percentage of school leavers progressing to university during the 1960s rose from 2.6% in 1960 to 6.0% in 1970.

A second expansion of universities, overseen by John Major's Conservative government between 1992-1997, saw the abolition of the binary HE system and many more institutions awarded university status. With the demarcation between universities and polytechnics now gone, the formation in 1994 of the Russell Group, a group of 17 research led universities, established a new hierarchy within HE. In the research literature, the 24 universities which now make up the Russell Group are sometimes referred to as 'elite' universities. However, the term 'elite' may also refer more specifically to 'top rung' Russell Group institutions i.e. those deemed more prestigious (and which are more selective) than others. Indeed, the very inclusivity brought by the expansion of HE has produced, concomitantly, an HE system so profoundly hierarchised that in addition to the Russell Group, there now exists a 'Sutton Trust 13', a group identified by the Sutton Trust as the most selective of all universities. Nonetheless, the 'massification' of HE has meant a great many more moderately attaining students now access a university degree course. Thanks largely to New Labour's 2001 policy initiatives to encourage widening participation, an estimated 48% of young people currently progress to HE by the age of 30 (DfE, 2017a). However, as Brown (1995) saw early on, the expansion of HE has

intensified the competition for credentials from elite universities because degree holders stand 'relative' to one another in a hierarchy of academic and social worth.

(Brown, 1995, p.38)

Above all, a degree from Oxbridge 'is judged to have greater capital value than one from a little-known university or college' in the job market (Brown, 1995, p.38).

Reay et al (2005) state that the 'expansion of Higher Education brought changes in the characteristics of institutions and their student clientele', and especially the rise in female students (p.2). Brooks' (2002) research, conducted around the same time, highlights the disproportionate number of full time university students from 'high-income families' and that, just as with women and Black, Asian, minority ethnic (BAME) students, 'students in the lowest income group' are concentrated in former polytechnics (pp.217-218). In a similar vein, Boliver (2011) explains that social class inequalities in higher education enrolment remained 'remarkably persistent' between 1960 and 1995, and only began to decline thereafter (Boliver, 2011, p.229).

Nonetheless, social class inequalities in ‘traditional and higher status degree programmes and at “Old” universities remained fundamentally unchanged’ (Boliver, 2011, p.229). Recent research on access to HE focuses primarily on the fair access policy in relation to admissions to ‘elite’ universities (Boliver, 2006, 2013; Candy, 2013; Jones 2012, 2013). Necessary though such research is for critiquing a policy which, as Boliver (2013) argues, fails the groups of students for whom it is designed, it reinforces the preoccupation with higher attaining students. This focus means the experiences of moderately attaining students and their access to HE remain invisible.

Moderately attaining sixth formers in a stratified system

New Labour’s post-2001 expansion of HE saw many more students in post-compulsory education, even before the raising of the school leaving age (ROSLA) to 18, in 2015. A recent UCAS report states that 43% of all young people entered higher education by age 19 in England (UCAS, 2016). The removal of the cap on student numbers in 2015 has further increased the numbers accessing university. In her foreword to the 2016 UCAS End of Cycle report, Curnock Cook (2016) states:

Many universities have responded to this new environment of flat demand and competitive recruitment by broadening their intake and, more often than not, recruiting students whose grades would not, in the past, have attracted an offer.

(UCAS, 2016, p.2)

It is a fair assumption that students whose grades would not previously ‘have attracted’ a university offer include many moderate attainers. Records showed that the percentage of 17-year olds still in school in England rose from 27% in 1980 to 76% in 2011 alone (Bolton, 2012, p.10). A significant proportion of this rise would seem attributable to moderately attaining students for whom going to ‘uni’ was now an option. However, a policy shift from New Labour’s widening participation agenda to the 2010 Conservative-led Coalition’s policy of fair access, has led to a policy focus on high attaining students’ access to highly selective, prestigious universities. The dominance of the fair access policy, reinforced by league tables which rank school sixth forms on progression to ‘top third’ universities, implies the relative unimportance of moderately attaining sixth formers’ HE destinations.

Having mapped out the landscape, in the following section I consider the ways in which schools sort by attainment. Although it is uncommon to sort by attainment in sixth form, it is arguable that current HE policy encourages forms of attainment sorting. The literature discussed helped to shape my critical examination of sorting practices at sixth form level.

Grouping by ‘ability’¹⁰

Currently under-researched, are the subtle and informal ways in which sixth formers may be effectively grouped by ‘ability’. Also absent from the research literature is any discussion of selective practices for entry into school sixth forms. Many schools use GCSE attainment, and sometimes additional tests, to ascertain students’ suitability for entry to sixth form and/or the study of certain qualifications and subjects.

The literature on selection and sorting by ability falls into two distinct groups. The first is exemplified by Gillborn and Youdell's (2000) study which shows the link between the external pressures of government policy and league tables and sorting practices within schools. Frequently cited, Gillborn and Youdell's work remains important because it shows how selective practices may be strategically employed to meet performance targets. Second, is the literature which focuses specifically on the mechanisms of sorting by ability, the reasoning behind such practices, and how pupils experience grouping by ability. The studies I have chosen to discuss here are those from both of these groups, with findings that promise to be most useful for my own analysis of selective practices at sixth form level.

Grouping by ‘ability’ to maximise returns

Gillborn and Youdell's (2000) examination of the way schools respond to the combined pressures of the need to raise standards and demonstrate performance in GCSE school league tables highlights ‘the relationship between national education policy and practices of selection at the school level’ (p.204). They found schools

¹⁰ I use the word ‘ability’ and ‘grouping by ability’ or ‘ability grouping’ to mean any banding, setting, streaming and/or tracking, and to reflect the terminology used in the literature. (See Dracup (2014), on the tendency to use ‘ability grouping’ as a blanket term for a range of different practices). However, I am uncomfortable with the word ‘ability’ in the context of student attainment. As Francis et al (2016) point out, ‘ability grouping’ [...] confuses educational attainment with a notion of innate potential academic “ability” (p.2).

employing a strategy of educational ‘triage’ for the expedient rationing of resources. Such a triage entailed focusing on students who promised the maximum return for the investment of additional resources in the form of teacher time and support. At GCSE level, the particular focus was students who straddled the C/D (pass/fail) border. At sixth form level, ‘rationing’ may also be carried out, albeit slightly differently to the GCSE ‘triage’ approach identified by Gillborn and Youdell. As studies by Reay (1998) and Reay et al (2005) found, rationing at sixth form level is more likely to privilege high attaining students and their applications to ‘elite’ universities, especially Oxbridge. The investment of resources is therefore ‘top heavy’, although the desired outcomes in terms of boosting school destination data and improving league table rankings, are similar to those of GCSE rationing. Gillborn and Youdell point out that grades serve as ‘key performance indicators’, with higher-grade passes ‘the supreme driving force for policy and practice’ at school level (Gillborn and Youdell 2000, p.198). This is as true for A levels as it is for GCSEs. Significantly, for moderate attainers at any level, any rationing of resources means students with unproblematic attainment – i.e. unlikely either to attain the highest grades or fail – may be safely bypassed in the allocation of additional resources (Gillborn and Youdell 2000, p.199). Gillborn and Youdell conclude that when ‘schools’ reactions are driven by the need to survive in the context of competition created and enforced by school league tables’ (p.204), many pupils are denied ‘equality of opportunity’ (p.1).¹¹ As will be seen in subsequent chapters, this argument is also applicable to the allocation of resources for moderately attaining sixth formers and their post-school choosing.

Reay (1998) and Reay et al’s (2005) studies of the influence of institutional habitus on students’ HE choosing show that disadvantaged minority groups are especially marginalised by dominant patterns of resource distribution in schools. Once the external pressures on school sixth forms are understood, such as the need to respond

¹¹ At the time of Gillborn and Youdell’s (2000) research, there was a drive for every student to gain at least five A* - C GCSE passes, including English and Maths. The GCSE system has since changed. First, with the introduction, in 2016, of a new performance measure, Progress 8, for which the ‘value added’ score in eight key GCSE subjects is used to assess performance (see Neumann et al, 2016). In addition, at the time of writing, a new GCSE grading system is being phased in. The old system comprising grades A* to E, with pass grades A* - C, has been replaced by a numerical grading system of grades 9 (highest) to 1 (lowest). Pass grades are now 9 to 5, with grade 4 deemed a ‘standard’ pass and grade 5 a ‘strong’ pass (Busby, 2017).

to HE policy and school league tables, it becomes easier to understand internal (selective) practices. Any sixth form selective practice which amounts to a 'rationing' of resources is likely, just as at GCSE, to be designed to maximise results.

Grouping by 'ability' - practices and consequences

A substantial amount of literature focuses on the effects of ability grouping on the academic attainment of different groups. Kutnick et al's (2005) extensive review of the literature concludes that 'pupils from minority ethnic groups and pupils with SEN are over-represented in lower sets' (p.4) and those from higher socio-economic status backgrounds 'more likely to be assigned to higher sets' (p.392). Boaler et al (2000) and Wiliam and Bartholomew (2004) found that working class students dominate lower ability groupings, irrespective of attainment levels. A restricted range of teaching meant opportunities to learn were reduced for students in lower sets (Boaler et al, 2000, p.631). In a similar finding, Ireson, Hallam and Hurley (2005) conclude that '(s)ocially disadvantaged students achieve significantly lower grades' as a result of setting (p.443). Other important studies in this area have been conducted by Youdell (2003), Araujo (2007), Rollock (2007a, 2007b), Archer (2008), Gillborn, Rollock, Vincent and Ball (2012) and Strand (2012), all of which find a direct correlation between a student's ethnicity and/or social class and perceived academic 'ability' and lower ability grouping. The Educational Endowment Fund (EFF) find '(o)verall, setting or streaming appears to benefit higher attaining pupils and be detrimental to the learning of mid-range and lower attaining learners' (EFF, 2017, np). Albeit their study is of the setting at year 7, Muijs and Dunne (2010) find that setting decisions by teachers are based on a combination of assumptions made about future potential, prior academic attainment, and judgements about the academic 'ability' of certain socio-economic groups. This finding would seem relevant to decisions made throughout secondary schooling. In summary, overwhelming evidence shows a correlation between students' socio-economic status and their expected attainment, and suggests practices so firmly entrenched in secondary school that it makes it probable similar patterns exist at sixth form level. However, other than studies which find a correlation between a student's social class and subject choice (Vidal-Rodeiro, 2007; Dilnot, 2016) and HE

choosing (Ball et al, 2002a, 2002b), the relationship between selective practices at sixth form, social class and attainment, is under-researched.

Teacher expectations

A recent review of the literature carried out by Francis et al (2016) highlights ‘teacher quality’, a lack of movement between sets and ‘an impoverished curriculum’ as factors which restrict access to the full curriculum for lower groups (p.6; Ireson et al, 2005, p.455. See also Ball, 1981; Boaler et al, 2000; Gillborn and Youdell, 2000; Ireson et al, 2002; Hallam and Ireson, 2007 and Muijs and Dunne, 2010). A variety of factors may work together ‘to create and perpetuate a self-fulfilling prophecy concerning outcomes for different pupils’ (Francis et al, 2016, p.6). With the exception of Oliver and Kettley’s (2010) work on the influence of teacher habitus on students’ HE choosing, there is little in the current literature which examines teachers’ expectations of sixth formers, or how these may shape students’ post-school aspirations. Leathwood and Hutchings (2003) point out that institutions both reflect and construct education inequalities (p.145). In their study of working class and minority ethnic students’ entry routes to HE, they found that ‘(c)lassed, raced and gendered assumptions about students’ ability and potential’ were key determinants in the educational pathways which students felt were expected of them (p.145). Harris’s (2012) study of 244 US high school teachers and their implementation of ‘standards-based reform’, also found evidence of ‘deeply embedded beliefs’ about students’ capabilities shaped by ‘race, social class, and English language status’ (p.146).¹² Similarly, Ireson et al’s (2005) longitudinal study of over 6000 students in 45 UK schools, found teachers had higher expectations of students placed in top set than those with similar grades in lower sets (Ireson et al 2005, p.456). Ireson et al (2005) cite Barker Lunn’s (1970) findings on the improved attainment of primary school pupils moved into higher classes. This, coupled with similar findings for year 9 pupils who attained better in higher sets than pupils with similar grades in lower sets, leads Ireson et al to state that:

¹² The US ‘standards-based reform’ (SBR) movement reflects ‘a confluence of policy trends’ and growing emphasis on testing ‘to monitor progress and hold schools accountable’ (Hamilton et al, 2008, p.2).

[the] evidence suggests there is likely to be a cumulative impact of ability grouping on students' attainment as they progress through the primary and secondary phases of education.

(Ireson et al, 2005, p.456)

Although, this 'cumulative effect' is likely to be most evident in Maths, the subject most often set at primary level, Ireson et al make an important point. For just as primary school setting impacts on the attainment for secondary students, it may be assumed that setting at GCSE will have implications for decisions about suitability for sixth form, and choice of subject and qualifications.

Pedagogic practice

The impact of teaching practices on the experiences of students grouped by ability at lower secondary also suggests ways to understand sixth form teaching practices. Hallam and Deathe's (2005) study of secondary school setting found that teachers 'expected a faster pace of work and covered topics in more depth with the more able' (p.20) and offered a more restricted range of activities to lower sets (p.14). In addition, Boaler et al's (2000) study found that schools were inclined to allocate teachers with less experience and fewer qualifications to lower ability groups (p.231; see also Kutnick et al, 2005, p.3). Other studies confirm that teachers' expectations and pedagogic practices alter according to ability groupings, and in ways that are detrimental to the learning of students in lower ability sets (Ball, 1981; Ireson et al, 2002; Rollock, 2007b). In addition, Strand (2012) and Rollock (2007b) both suggest that 'teacher expectation effects' (Strand 2012, p.75) may contribute to achievement gaps between Black and white students.

Boaler et al's (2000) studies of ability grouping are especially helpful because we are given an insight into year 8 and 9 pupils' experiences of setting (for Maths). The findings point to middle set pupils being defined by what they are *not*; pupils describe being made to feel they do not work fast enough to be allocated to a 'top-set' or slow enough for the 'bottom-set' (Boaler et al, 2000, p.641). The pupils' descriptions point to teachers lacking sensitivity to their specific learning needs,

coupled with low expectations of their GCSE potential (Boaler et al 2000, p.644).

Boaler et al (2000) observe:

teachers change their normal practices when they are given top-set classes to teach, appearing to believe that being a 'top-set' student entails a qualitative and meaningful difference from other students, rather than simply being in the highest attaining range of students in the school.

(Boaler et al, 2000, p.637)

This observation raises questions about why teachers approach different groups of students differently (and in passing, we are alerted to the relative nature of 'high attaining' in schools). For, if teachers believe being a 'top set' student 'entails a qualitative and meaningful difference from other students', it suggests that such a belief applies equally to other groups. Boaler et al's observation is just as easily applied to teachers at sixth form level: why might some invest a disproportionate of resources in higher attaining and/or 'posh students' and their HE destinations (Reay 1998, p.522; Reay et al, 2005), and why might schools assume moderate attainers applying to less selective universities need less support with their applications? One answer might lie in Ball et al's (1998) 'economy of student worth'. In such an economy, high attainers and their HE aspirations are deemed of greater 'value' to a school, and therefore worthy of greater investment, than moderate attainers and their HE or non-HE aspirations.

Average, middle and moderate attainers

The lack of interest in the educational experiences of middle or moderate attainers at lower secondary, as at sixth form level, may be explained by a research preference for groups deemed to be more interesting and educational concerns deemed to be more pressing, such as the learning of disadvantaged and/or high and low attaining groups. Unless part of a much wider study, GCSE moderate attainers, are rarely a focus of study. Connelly, Murray and Gayle (2013), Gayle, Murray, and Connelly (2013, 2014) and Gayle and Playford's (2014) quantitative studies of 'middling' GCSE attainment using data from the Youth Cohort Study of England and Wales (YCS) are an exception. Gayle et al (2013) state their intention 'to better document the experiences of "ordinary" students with "middle", or moderate, GCSE attainment' (p.ii). However, their reliance on an analysis of quantitative data does

little to inform our understanding of students' experiences. Finding 'no crisp boundaries' to indicate a 'middle' category of moderate GCSE attainment, they conclude that GCSE attainment is situated 'on a continuum' (Gayle et al, 2013, p.28). Unhelpfully, Gayle et al base their analysis of moderate attainment on four (or less) GCSEs. However, since five A*- C GCSE passes was, at the time of their research, the minimum level on which school league tables, and all national percentage figures and average GCSE points were calculated, four GCSE passes might be more accurately described as low attainment. In addition, the entry level for most school sixth forms is a minimum of five GCSE passes, with B grades for subjects chosen for A level.

Gayle and Playford's (2014) uncovering of patterns of middling GCSE attainment does, however, point to different types of moderate attainment, prescribed by students' subject choices in arts and science subjects. It would be helpful to know if any further patterns of GCSE attainment may be detected in other subject choices. Quite possibly, moderate attainers in traditional subjects become high attainers in 'new' or vocational subjects. An examination of types of moderate GCSE attainment would also add vital detail to the statistics analysed by Gayle et al (2013, 2014) and Gayle and Playford (2014). Such a study might, incidentally, also alert policy makers to the wasteful narrowness of current focus on facilitating subjects (see Candy, 2013, p.4; Garner, 2013).

Archer's (2008) study would seem more helpful for informing an understanding of 'middling' or moderate attainment and the types of pupils who achieve it. In her study of 'the impossibility of minority ethnic academic "success"', Archer conceptualises average, or middling attainment, as 'good enough'. Her 'good enough' GCSE 'success' is characterised by the attainment of mostly Bs and Cs (Archer, 2008, p. 93). Like Gillborn and Youdell, (2000), Archer explains that this level of attainment is one which 'attracts little attention or resources' (Archer, 2008, p.93). Archer explains further that 'good enough' attainment tends not to be associated with white middle-class students, for whom average or 'good' attainment is a 'cause for concern/action' (Archer, 2008, p.93). This argument is helpful in explaining why middle class moderate attainment escapes association with 'ordinariness'.

The 'ordinary' student

Historically, the literature has used 'ordinary' to describe working class students of average attainment, although the term has evolved greatly since its original use in the 1940s and fifties.¹³ 'Ordinary' is typically used to describe both moderate academic attainment and the person who does the attaining. Brown's (1987) original concept of 'ordinary' was used for lower secondary pupils. Importantly, Brown identified 'ordinary' pupils of middling attainment as a discrete group worthy of academic interest. Pye (1988) examined the 'invisibility' of 'ordinary' pupils. His honest acknowledgment that as a young teacher he looked for pupils who would reward him most and who were 'attractive and interesting' (Pye, 1988, p.21) points to just one of the reasons why some of today's moderately attaining sixth formers and their aspirations are overlooked. More recent accounts of the educational experiences of 'ordinary' pupils as a *discrete group* may be found in Stahl's (2014, 2015) studies of 'ordinary' young men's learner identities and aspirations. However, only Roberts' (2012) study of 'ordinary' young men, examines the educational experiences of moderately attaining students in post-compulsory education, albeit his young men do not aspire to HE. Roberts (2012) argues that 'ordinary' young people are overlooked because the literature is more concerned with a 'polarised understanding' of working class disengagement with education. He draws our attention to the ways in which the literature has tended to pitch 'laddishness' against its 'other': the working-class high performer, or Willis's 'ear 'ole' (Roberts, 2012, p. 203). Such polarisation appears to continue. While there has been a welcome re-surfacing of interest in 'ordinary' young people in the field of youth studies, the focus of this work has been on the experiences of 'NEETs'¹⁴ (Roberts, 2011, 2012; Roberts and MacDonald, 2013).

Elsewhere in the literature, such as in studies which examine school practices in relation to sorting by ability and HE choosing, moderately attaining pupils tend to be subsumed within larger and/or more distinctive groups. In the literature on HE choosing, such students are studied for aspects of their identity, such as social class, ethnicity, and gender. The HE choosing of 'ordinary' or moderately attaining young

¹³ For example, Crowther (1959) refers to pupils of 'ordinary ability' in secondary modern schools (p.82) and it is clear he means students whose attainment deems them unable to sit examinations. Crowther also refers to a 1942 text entitled 'The Education of the Ordinary Child' as book containing the author's experiences with 'educationally subnormal pupils' (p.94).

¹⁴ 'NEETs' is an acronym for young people not in education, employment or training.

people, as a discrete group, is not considered. Yet these HE choosers will form the majority in many school sixth forms. Described variously as the 'invisible majority' (Brown, 1987), the 'missing middle' (Roberts 2011; Roberts and Macdonald, 2013; Gayle et al, 2014), the 'concealed middle' (Gayle and Playford, 2014) and the 'overlooked and squeezed middle' (Hodgson and Spours, 2015), 'ordinary' students are discussed in terms which suggest they are not visible to the eye, hidden or forgotten. Only Roberts' (2012) 'ordinary' students - because they do not conform to 'dichotomous notions of resistance and conformity' (p.204) – form a '*distinctive middle-ground*' (p.203; my italics).

'Ordinary' students enter school sixth forms having attained a range of 'middling' (Gayle et al, 2013) GCSE attainment and access a range of 'good' and less selective, 'new' universities. Many share characteristics with Brown's (1987) 'ordinary kids' and Pye's (1988) 'invisible' pupils left by school to 'to get on with it' (Pye 1988, p. 195; Roberts, 2012). Brown's (1987) 'ordinary kids' are not 'high flyers but they do make an effort' (p.39). As already noted, there have been significant changes to the educational landscape since Brown and Pye carried out their studies of 'ordinary' pupils; in particular, the expansion of HE and the raising of the school leaving age to 18. Nonetheless, aspects of the existing literature on 'ordinary' pupils are helpful for informing an understanding of the experiences of moderately attaining sixth formers. For example, Brown points out that when working class pupils choose practical, as opposed to academic subjects, they are making culturally meaningful choices rather than making 'a necessity into a virtue' (Brown, 1987, p.47). Comparisons may be drawn with Vidal-Rodeiro's (2007) study of subject choice at sixth form level which found more students from a 'lower social class backgrounds' than students from a 'higher social class backgrounds' chose 'newer' - as opposed to traditional - A level subjects because they were deemed 'new and exciting' (p.67).

Having accessed a school sixth form with the necessary minimum of five GCSE A*-C passes, most 'ordinary' (working-class) students attain sufficiently to aspire to a range of non-Russell Group universities (see Ball et al, 2002b; Boliver, 2011; see also Mangan et al (2010) on the correlation between social class and HE choice). The dominance of the fair access policy means much of the current literature focuses on high attaining working-class students who fail to access 'elite' universities (e.g. Sutton Trust, 2010; Boliver, 2013, 2015; Thornton et al, 2014; Boliver, Crawford,

Powell and Craig, 2017). A preoccupation with rates of access to selective universities perhaps explains why the experiences of ‘ordinary’ sixth formers and their HE choosing are overlooked. With the exception of Roberts (2012), it is hard to unpick from the literature the educational experiences, of moderately attaining sixth formers as a group *in their own right*, let alone their experience of post-school choice-making.

Policy as discourse

Having mapped out the landscape of grouping by ‘ability’ and outlined some of the gaps in the literature examining middling attainment, my next section examines the influence of policy discourses on sixth form practices. My intention is to highlight how some key sixth form and HE policies, and in particular the dominance of fair access, impact on the educational experiences of moderately attaining sixth formers and their post-school choosing. Before discussing the policy context, it would seem useful to examine ‘policy as discourse’ (Ball, 2006, p.48).

As Ball (2006) argues, discourses structure the language, perceptions and practices of teachers, managers and parents. They set boundaries to what is deemed legitimate and important in everyday social and professional contexts, and privilege certain practices whilst marginalising others. For Foucault (1972), a discourse is a set of statements which are systematically organised to produce certain effects. Discourses are not merely

groups of signs (signifying elements referring to contents or representations)
but practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak.

(Foucault, 1972, p. 49)

Once embedded in everyday social practices, discourses operate at a largely unconscious level. In schools, discourses of ‘ability’ can be seen both in the assumptions made about certain groups and selective practices. The practical organisation of students, such as steering different attainment groups towards ‘appropriate’ (Ball, 1981) subjects, is an illustration of discourses of attainment in practice. Actors (teachers and students) within any discourse tend to make choices and decisions that reproduce the terms of the discourse and its intended effects. Discourse

is irreducible to language and speech: it is *more* than this (Foucault, 1972, p.48). Ball explains:

We do not speak a discourse, it speaks us (...) We do not 'know' what we say, we 'are' what we say and do. In these terms we are spoken by policies, we take up the positions constructed for us within policies.

(Ball, 2006, p.48)

Teachers may act within a discourse with unquestioning acceptance while others might take up positions which are more flexible. Oliver and Kettley's (2010) study found a variation in the enthusiasm with which teachers conformed to the assumptions about the desirability of fair access and that all high attaining groups should aspire to 'elite' universities (p.744). They found 'divergent ethical beliefs about either the unfairness of elite universities or the injustice of differential access to elite universities' (Oliver and Kettley, 2010, p.743). While some teachers conformed to the fair access discourse and worked hard to raise the low rate of applications to elite universities, others did not.

Discourses, once established in national and local contexts as dominant, are powerful because they normalise practice, marginalise alternative practices and ways of thinking, and make invisible or less important particular categories of people whilst privileging others. Once established, discourses are adhered to because they 'get things done, accomplish real tasks, gather authority' (Said, 2000, p.242). They also shape the authority structures within institutions. Oliver and Kettley's (2010) study highlights the tensions which arose when a headteacher's desire for his school to conform to the aims of the fair access policy challenged teachers' beliefs about what was desirable, or realistic, for students (p.445-6). When a teacher questioned 'the government's vision that all students should be encouraged to attend university', she placed herself outside the policy discourse of widening participation. Oliver and Kettley's study of the influence of teacher habitus on student's applications to 'elite' universities is especially useful because of the focus on teacher agency. The research shows that while some teachers may be 'interventionist' with students' HE choosing and actively implement the fair access policy, others exercise agency by making value judgments that do not conform to the HE discourses shaping school practice.

Policy influences: school practices and their impact on moderately attaining sixth formers

The impact of fair access

The term ‘fair access’ entered official discourse with the publication of the 2003 White Paper on Higher Education (Boliver, 2013, p.346). However, a few years before, in 1998, the Sutton Trust, an education charity which ‘work(s) to raise the aspirations of young people from low and middle-income backgrounds and to increase their chances of accessing top universities...’ (Sutton Trust website), ran its first summer school at Cambridge university. The aim was ‘to open up access to the UK's elite universities’ for students who might not otherwise have considered Cambridge (Garner, 2015). A few years later, research carried out by Reay et al (2001a) found that resources in both state and private schools were being ‘mobilised differentially for different groups of students’ and that this ‘was particularly evident in relation to Oxbridge applicants’ (para. 5.2).¹⁵ A tendency to focus support on high attaining students and their post-school destinations was therefore already developing before fair access became Government policy. Sixth form funding is currently dependent on student numbers, and the performance of many school sixth forms depends largely on their ability to attract high attaining students. Arguably, fair access legitimised the privileging of high attaining sixth formers. Albeit the number of high attaining sixth formers who progress to Russell Group universities, and especially Oxbridge, is relatively small in most school sixth forms. Hodgson and Spours (2014) state that only the ‘top 10%’ of state educated sixth formers access Russell Group universities (p.480). Government figures show 20% of non-selective state educated students access ‘top third’ HEIs (Gov.UK, 2017b).

There are increasing pressures on school sixth forms to focus their resources on students who aspire to ‘elite’ universities. Since 2013, state-funded sixth forms have provided destination data, with a particular focus on numbers progressing to ‘top third HEIs’.¹⁶ A government policy ‘to promote and incentivise’ the uptake of

¹⁵ The first appearance of this finding was in Reay et al’s (2001a) article ‘Making a Difference? Institutional Habituses and Higher Education Choice’ *Sociological Research Online*, vol. 5, no. 4. In the absence of page numbers, I have provided paragraph numbers.

¹⁶ Schools’ destination data are recorded not only for ‘top third HEIs’ but also ‘Russell Group universities (inc. Ox. And Cam)’ and, further, ‘Oxford or Cambridge’. One further category is for ‘other higher education institutions or providers’ (see DfE, 2017c, p.22).

facilitating A levels (DfE, 2017b) has been reinforced by sixth form leagues tables which now rank schools according to how many students attain AAB in at least two facilitating subjects (Gov.UK, 2017a). This focus marginalises the academic preferences of moderately attaining sixth formers who are more likely to take a mixture of academic and vocational Level 3 qualifications, or to study for a combination of A levels weighted towards ‘newer’ subjects. The research literature on how schools are responding to these pressures has yet to be produced. However, the quality education press describes students as ‘collateral damage’ as sixth forms strive to meet accountability measures and maintain their position in the A-level league tables (Mooney, TES, 2017, np). Headteachers also warn that destination data ‘create an incentive for schools to focus their efforts on getting students into Russell Group universities’ (Parr, 2013, np). Additional pressures on sixth forms have been felt by a 14% ‘real-term cut’ inflicted on the 16–19 education budget between 2010 and 2015 (Sibieta, 2015). While my thesis does not include an evaluation of the impact of funding cuts on sixth forms, research carried out by Conlon and Halterbeck (2015) and Sibieta (2015) highlights the impact of funding cuts on school resources. It seems possible that a series of devices to reinforce the fair access policy - an increasingly academic curriculum, more prescriptive accountability measures and sixth form league tables – coupled with budgeting constraints, must influence schools to ration sixth form resources in ways similar to those found by Gillborn and Youdell (2000) at GCSE. Students hardest hit by such rationing are arguably those whose HE and non-HE destinations do not serve the objectives of school performance and student recruitment.

Subject choice - facilitating, ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ subjects

Vidal-Rodeiro’s (2007) study of subject choices made by students in 60 sixth forms, including state and independent schools and colleges, appears unique in its breadth. She uses GCSE attainment as an indicator of student ‘ability’, and groups students by ‘higher’ and ‘lower’ ability. She finds that uptake of traditional academic subjects increases by attainment and that the trend is reversed for the newer/vocational subjects (Vidal-Rodeiro, 2007, p.19). Vidal-Rodeiro describes a hierarchy of A level subjects, with less accessible, ‘traditional academic subjects’ ranked above more accessible, ‘newer/vocational subjects’. Her study also shows that fewer newer/vocational subjects are taught in grammar and independent schools (Vidal-

Rodeiro, 2007, p.7). Fazackerley and Chant (2008) also found that school type influenced students' subject choices with 'nonselective state school students (...) far more likely to take non-traditional A-levels than Independent and Grammar school students' (p.1; see also Candy, 2013). Fazackerley and Chant's study of applications to 17 Russell Group universities found that just 2% of Sociology and 6% of Psychology A-level candidates came from independent schools (p.9).

The first edition of the Russell Group's *Informed Choices* (2011) formalised the distinction between 'hard', and 'soft' subjects. 'Hard' subjects were described as 'more traditional and theoretical subjects, for example: English, History, Physics and Chemistry'; 'soft' subjects were described as having 'a vocational or practical bias, for example: Media Studies, Art and Design, Photography and Business Studies' (Russell Group, 2011, p. 25).¹⁷ In later editions of *Informed Choices*, the Russell Group attempted to distance itself from the controversial use of 'hard' and 'soft' as descriptors for different types of subjects. Instead of attempting to define a 'hard' subject, facilitating subjects are described as ones which 'open doors to more degrees' than others (Russell Group, 2016/7, p.1).

Perceptions about the status of different types of subjects were prevalent before the Russell Group introduced the term 'facilitating' for high value A levels. Ball's (1981) early study of ability grouping and its consequences for pupils' 'O' level and CSE subjects showed that just as now, 'high status' academic subjects had the 'highest exchange value' and were normally reserved for higher attaining pupils (Ball, 1981, p.138).¹⁸ Hopper (1972), Ball, and more recently Gillborn and Youdell (2000), all describe selective practices by which pupils are either 'cooled out' or 'warmed up' for different subjects and/or qualifications, according to perceived 'ability' (Gillborn and Youdell, 2002, p.89). With the current policy focus on high attainers and their access to Russell Group universities, it would seem useful to ask how students choose, or are steered towards, either 'high status' facilitating or 'newer' subjects. This has implications for 'higher end' moderate attainers who may aspire to less selective Russell Group universities.

¹⁷ See Appendix B for a list of all facilitating subjects.

¹⁸ Ball's study was of pupils taking 'O' levels and less highly valued CSE examination's in the early 1980s, and since replaced by the one GCSE exam, but his findings remain relevant to the issue of subject choice today.

The small body of more recent work on A level subject choice is concerned with the uptake of facilitating subjects among different types of schools. In addition to Vidal-Rodeiro's major study of school type and her findings on the influences of students' prior attainment and socio-economic status on subject choice, studies by Wilkins and Meeran (2011) have shown the influence of GCSE attainment on subject choice while Dilnot (2016) examines the influence of social class. All the research reflects concern that students attending non-selective state schools and/or from lower socio-economic groups are less likely to take facilitating A levels preferred by selective universities (see also, Fazackerley and Chant, 2008; Sutton Trust, 2010; Candy, 2013). The Russell Group's *Informed Choices* (2016/7) places the responsibility of making 'informed' subject choices on the student and queries whether students for whom facilitating subjects are unappealing are 'trying to avoid a challenge'. (*Informed Choices*, 2016/7, p.32). However, Vidal-Rodeiro's (2007) study found that many students from lower socio-economic groups chose an A level subject 'because it was new and exciting' (p.7). Only 18% of her respondents chose a subject 'because they thought it would be easy' (Vidal-Rodeiro, 2007, p.30). This suggests that reasons for students choosing 'newer' subjects are not those implied in *Informed Choices*, and may have more to do with wanting to engage with a curriculum which up to sixth form did not feel 'new and exciting', and which offers the opportunity to 'shine' in a subject not studied at GCSE. However, a perception that some subjects are 'better' or 'higher status' than others, because they are preferred by Russell Group universities, has been impressed upon schools. While the difference in perception of academic and vocational qualifications is nothing new, using the percentage uptake and grades attained in facilitating subjects as a performance measure for sixth forms reinforces the status of traditional A levels in a new way. This has implications for moderately attaining students and their subject choices; not least, the pressure on schools to prioritise facilitating subjects and steer higher attaining students towards taking them. In addition, the current 'crisis' in sixth form funding is forcing all sixth forms to cut courses (Henshaw, 2017; Martin, 2017). The choices school sixth forms are having to make would suggest a reduction in subject offer and/or an allocation of resources which are detrimental to students studying 'newer' subjects.

The personal statement

In addition to A level subjects and grades, a student includes a personal statement as part of their UCAS application. As a non-academic indicator (Jones, 2012) the personal statement forms a key part of the UCAS application which gives students the chance to explain their academic interest in their chosen course and how their studies have prepared them for that.¹⁹ There is, however, no policy on how schools should support students with the making of their UCAS applications.

Jones's (2012, 2013) examination of personal statements written by students with similar levels of attainment at independent, grammar and state schools, led him to conclude that state school students receive less help composing their personal statements. They 'struggle to draw on suitable work and life experience' and their statements contain more grammatical and spelling errors than those by grammar and independent school students (Jones 2012, p.5; Jones, 2013). Shuker's (2014) study of students' personal statements is rooted in the premise that 'self-promotion or "self-marketing" is as an increasingly important skill for effective transitions within education and work' (Shuker, 2014, p.226). This would seem at odds with the expectations of the Russell Group universities. However, her study of how students in three different sixth forms approached the writing of their personal statements found a correlation between the guidance given by schools and the educational trajectories 'considered appropriate' for their students (Shuker, 2014, p.224). Shuker also found that the type of advice given to students was distinctive to each school and shaped by its 'strategic positioning' in the education market (Shuker, 2014, p.234). She concludes that where schools 'develop particular niches in order to compete for students, those students may find themselves participating in a pedagogy that precludes other pathways [and] curriculum options...' (Shuker, 2014, p.240). Shuker's study is confined to a comparison of support given to students in different schools and does not examine practices *within* schools. Nevertheless, her findings have important implications for moderate attainers who aspire to university. For wherever progression to Russell Group universities is key to a school's 'strategic positioning' in the local school market, the UCAS applications of students who aspire to 'new' universities, are likely to be deemed of secondary importance.

¹⁹ I explain the UCAS application process in Chapter 4. See also Appendix D.

Shuker (2014) appears alone in her study of support for personal statement within schools. As Jones (2012) explains, the personal statement has received little attention in the research literature (p.8). His own study examines how the personal statement is used by just one Russell Group university. However, his findings of ‘stark’ differences in the quality of statements from students across different school types (Jones, 2012, p.4) and of evidence of ‘unequal levels of information, support and advice’ (p.11) are echoed by Candy (2013) and Schwartz’s (2004) examination of university admissions procedures. In addition, Candy finds inconsistencies in the importance attributed to the personal statement and how they are evaluated across different Russell Group universities. Schwartz (2004) found that levels of understanding of what is required varied ‘significantly’ among teachers (p.26). UCAS’s (2012) own review of university admissions procedures revealed a common perception among teachers that the personal statement was not always used (p.36). In all cases, research has focused on differences in levels of support for students’ UCAS applications according to school type. Like Shuker’s (2014) research, it has not considered the possibility of differentiated levels of support for the HE applications of different attainment groups *within* schools. Schools have an incentive to prioritise the personal statements of Russell Group applicants. Recent policy initiatives designed to enforce fair access, such as the inclusion in school league tables of percentages of students who progress to Russell Group institutions, have further intensified the focus on this group. How the influence of the fair access policy impacts on moderate attainers’ experiences of applying to university, and where they access support for the writing of their personal statements, as of yet has excited no research interest. The injustice of this would seem compounded by the pervasiveness of an HE discourse in many schools that marginalises the provision of careers advice, and the opportunity for students to make informed decisions about whether or not university is ‘for me’.

Careers advice

While the numbers of moderately attaining sixth formers who do not aspire to HE may be small in schools which take pride in progression to university, the provision of careers advice would seem essential for any student uncertain about their post-school destination. A recent report by the House of Lords Select Committee on Social Mobility (House of Lords, 2016) states that middle attainers who neither

aspire to HE nor are at risk of becoming 'NEET', have been 'overlooked' by policy-makers (p.13). The report found that careers advice and education were being delivered in a way which saw many young people 'simply drift into further studies or work without prospects' (House of Lords, 2016, p.4).

For over 40 years, careers advice was the responsibility of local education authorities (LEAs) who, in partnership with schools, provided support for students' post-school choosing (Andrews, 2013, p.11). Between 2001 – 2011, the government funded organisation, Connexions, provided 'all kinds of Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) to young people' (Chadderton, 2015, p.84). In 2011, the Conservative Coalition's Education Act passed all responsibility for careers guidance in England to schools, with only 'the vaguest of guidelines, and no extra funds to fulfil the new requirements' (Chadderton, 2015, p.84). In 2012, the statutory requirement for schools to provide 'independent and impartial' careers advice was extended to years 12 and 13. However, as Coiffait (2013) found, careers advice 'drops away in years 12–13' (p.32). Coiffait also found 'significantly more' careers advice for years 12 and 13 in the private sector than in non-selective state schools (Coiffait, 2013, p.32).

The recent literature on the provision of careers advice has drawn attention to a 'deterioration' in the level and quality of careers advice being given to young people (Andrews, 2013; Chadderton, 2015), the 'patchy' provision in schools (Coiffait, 2013), and the lack of teacher competence when advising on vocational options (Fuller et al, 2014). As Chadderton points out, Government expectations that schools build relationships with local employers when teachers do not have the experience, existing relationships or time, are unrealistic (Chadderton, 2015, p.95). In addition, unlike other areas of sixth form provision, careers advice is not subject to performance measures. There seems little incentive therefore, for schools to invest in careers advice. The lack of proper careers advice in schools is especially problematic for sixth formers who seek alternatives to HE. The associated costs of providing work experience has seen this careers-related activity suffer the sharpest decline (Coiffait, 2013, p.24). The dominance of HE policies which encourage schools to promote university, coupled with an impractical and unenforceable policy on the delivery of careers advice, is likely to result in a distribution of resources which disadvantages moderate attainers who seek an alternative to HE.

The cost of going to ‘uni’

In this final section on key policies affecting moderately attainers’ experiences of school and their post-school choosing, I consider the cost of HE fees and student debt. At the time of writing, the cost of tuition fees for almost all universities stands at £9,250 (Havergal, 2016). Recent OECD figures show that UK universities charge the highest fees in the world (Morgan, 2016, np; Kentish, 2017) and that English graduates have the highest student debts in the developed world (Belfield et al, 2017, p.2). In addition, in 2016, maintenance grants to which the poorer students were entitled, were replaced by an additional student loan. The latest figures from the Institute of Fiscal Studies (IFS) point to students from the poorest 40% of families graduating from university with an average of £57,000 debt (Belfield et al, 2017, p.17). It seems highly probable that increasing numbers will see the attractions of a student lifestyle far outweighed by the ‘real’ cost of going to university (see Archer and Hutchings, 2000). The Sutton Trust blames the withdrawal of maintenance grants for the loss of lower income applicants to ‘elite’ institutions (Scott, 2016, np). The impact of the cost of HE on the far greater proportion of moderately attaining applicants would seem equally important.

Callender and Mason’s (2017) study of students’ attitudes to debt found that aversion to debt was more likely to deter ‘lower class’ students from aspiring to HE in 2015 than in 2002 (p.20). In addition, de Vries (2014) study of differences in earnings for graduates from different types of universities highlights the importance of the subject studied to future earnings. Graduates from more selective universities, and with degrees in medicine, engineering and economics, earn more and are more likely to go on to a professional job, than graduates of less selective universities, or graduates in the arts, humanities, or social sciences (p.46; see also MacMillan, Tyler and Vignoles, 2014). Callender and Mason also point out that, allowing for inflation, student debt for both fees and maintenance rose by 260% between 2002 and 2014 (Callender and Mason, 2017, p.23). These figures apply to the period *before* the abolition of maintenance grants, in 2016. Arguably, student loans merely serve to disguise the ‘real cost’ of university for poorer, moderately attaining students, the majority of whom are more likely to graduate from universities and/or with degree types which have a lower currency in the job market and with a debt they will be paying off for the majority of their working lives. Certainly, it would seem that

England's student funding system now threatens to undermine widening participation policies rather than broadening and equalising HE participation (Callender and Mason, 2017, p.43). In many school sixth forms progression to university is actively encouraged. Britton, Dearden, Shephard and Vignole (2016) argue that students from all socioeconomic backgrounds need to be properly informed about their options, and especially in light of the diversity in graduate earnings across subject and institutions (p.5). They further point out that the 'under reporting of the disparity in graduate earnings' is likely to disadvantage most students who come from families who are less informed about HE choices (Britton et al, 2016, p.5), and poorer students who are 'less likely to attend a higher status university' (p.7).

In my next section, I move from my consideration of the influence of key policies on school practices and students' post-school choosing, to the literature which has examined the structural, social and cultural influences on students' HE choosing.

The influence of habitus on HE choosing

Oliver and Kettley (2010) explain that HE choosing is mediated by a wide range of influences including class and ethnicity, the influence of peers, parents, family networks and domestic expectations (p. 738). During the period when policy discourses were dominated by the emphasis on widening participation, valuable work was carried out by Reay et al (2001a, 2001b), Ball et al (2002a, 2002b), Brooks (2002, 2003), Archer, Hutchings and Ross (2003), Hutchings (2003), and Leathwood and Hutchings (2003), all of which explored the new types of HE chooser and the different influences on their HE choosing. The experiences of ethnic minority HE choosers (see especially, Weekes-Bernard, 2010) and working-class students featured highly in this literature. Their distinctive status as minority groups new to HE choosing offered insights into the different influences of familial and institutional habitus on students' HE decision-making. When the spotlight is trained on a particular group, such as those defined around class and ethnicity, other groups fall into the shadow - and so it is with moderate attainers. Their experiences of HE choosing are present in this body of literature but subsumed within the experiences of other groups. In her study of the influence of family and friends on students' HE

choosing, Brooks (2003) refers obliquely to moderate attainers whose HE decisions are based on

what constitutes a feasible application [...] by differentiating themselves from others both above and below them on the 'hierarchy of ability'.

(Brooks, 2003, p.293)

Brooks' focus is the HE choosing of lower middle class students. She argues that the literature often assumes the homogeneity of the middle class, and that a sociological understanding of the HE decision-making of the lower middle classes contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how young people think about their futures (Brooks, 2003, p.283). Equally, her fleeting reference to students who are neither 'high' nor 'low' attainers, implies a non-homogenous group of moderate attainers. In addition to representing a broad range of attainment, this group will be crossed by a variety of intersecting factors such as social class, ethnicity and gender and, further still, by familial habitus. The unravelling of how schools support the variety of moderate attainers with their HE, or other post-school, choices, is therefore possibly more complex than for any other attainment group. The sheer diversity of moderately attaining sixth formers and their post-school aspirations suggests an exciting and worthwhile area of study. The puzzle is why these students have not been examined more closely before now.

Key studies of the role of habitus on students' HE choosing have examined the influence of 'institutional habitus' (Reay, 1998; Reay et al, 2005) and 'familial habitus' (Ball et al, 2002a, 2002b; Brooks, 2003; David, Ball, Davies and Reay, 2003; Reay et al, 2005) on students' choice-making. Oliver and Kettley's (2010) study considers the influence of a teacher's habitus on students' applications to 'elite' universities. They argue that 'teachers' histories, prior experiences, moral and political' dispositions may shape teachers' 'proactivity or resignation' in engaging with students' aspirations (Oliver and Kettley, 2010, 740). Archer, Hollingworth and Halsall (2007) explore young people's 'presentations of style' as an embodied component within the habitus influencing views of HE as 'unthinkable' and 'not for me' (p.221). The literature on HE choosing is evidence of the ways in which Bourdieu's original concept of habitus has been developed in order to understand

and explain the complexity of students' decision-making or rejection of HE.

Bourdieu explained habitus as:

a system of acquired dispositions functioning on the practical level as categories of perception and assessment or as classificatory principles as well as being the organizing principles of action...

(Bourdieu, 1990a, p.13)

In addition, habitus is described as 'embodied history, internalised as second nature and so forgotten as history' (Bourdieu, 1990b, p.56). Habitus may be understood therefore as a set of cultural values that govern perceptions and judgements, which are shaped by the individual's social background.

Institutional habitus

Reay et al (2005) explain that as with individual habituses, institutional habituses have a history and have been established over time (p.36): a school's habitus 'permeates' the processes involved in students' HE choice making (p.48). Citing MacDonough's work (1996) on 'organisational habitus', Reay et al (2005) explain further that a school's institutional habitus

constitutes a complex amalgam of agency and structure and may be understood as the impact of a cultural group or social class on an individual's behaviour as it is mediated through an organisation.

(McDonough, 1997, cited in Reay et al, 2005, p.36)

Reay et al argue that the institutional habitus is a more powerful influence on students' HE choosing than family background: albeit some families choose schools in order to access a particular institutional habitus (Reay et al, 2005, pp.36-7). Their study of six school sixth forms found that the institutional habitus was mobilised 'differentially for different groups' and that this was particularly evident in the disproportionate investment of resources in Oxbridge applicants (Reay et al 2005, p.48; see also Reay, 1998, pp. 524-5). Oliver and Kettley (2010) arrive at similar findings. At the time of Reay et al's research, the fair access policy was not in effect, but their findings remain highly relevant to the current policy context where schools

are being encouraged to focus resources on high attainers' HE aspirations, and especially progression to 'elite' Russell Group institutions.

Oliver and Kettley's (2010) study identifies 'official' forms of HE advice common to many schools but point out that such official support belies 'the informal cultures of advice within schools, particularly in relation to guidance around elite universities' (Oliver and Kettley 2010, p.738). In a similar finding, Reay (1998) and Reay et al (2005) identify the importance of school 'sponsorship' for applications to 'elite' universities. 'Sponsorship' appears to include types of informal advice and school surveillance of applications reserved for 'posh students [who] get all the help' (Reay, 1998, p.522) and students applying to prestigious universities (p.525). A school's 'sponsorship' of Oxbridge applications would seem to include the phenomenon identified by Oliver and Kettley as 'informal cultures of advice'; however, the phenomenon is referred to in passing and not further explored. Similarly, Reay (1998) and Reay et al's (2005) 'sponsorship' is mentioned in relation to Oxbridge applications but not defined. However, 'sponsorship' appears to be an amalgam of official and unofficial support such as personal encouragement and enhanced levels of support through which a school adds its 'weight' to Oxbridge applications. It would seem useful to examine the influence of institutional and teacher habituses on the extent of school 'sponsorship' and informal support given to students' applying to 'elite' universities. Such an examination promises to throw light on how schools 'translate' the fair access policy (Braun et al, 2010), and impact of the fair access policy on a school's provision of support for all students' HE and non-HE choices.

Familial habitus

Reay (1998), Ball et al (2002a, 2002b), Brooks (2002), David et al (2003) and Reay et al's (2005) studies all consider the importance of a students' social background and especially the influence of the familial habitus on students' HE choices. Reay et al (2005) explain the family habitus as a 'deeply ingrained system of perspectives experiences and predispositions' shared by family members (p.61). They explain that students are 'differentially positioned' in relation to the institutional habitus of their school according to the extent to which family influences are 'congruent or discordant' with those of the school (Reay et al, 2005, p.38). A student will feel like a 'fish in water' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p.127) when there is a 'fit' between

the institutional and familial habituses. In the same way, the habitus of a working-class student who seeks an alternative to HE will not 'fit' the institutional habitus of a school which takes pride in its students' progression to university. Similarly, Ball et al (2002b) describe the individual habitus as an influence on HE decision-making. As well as matching academic performance to a university's selectivity, Ball et al argue that students make social/cultural 'classifications' of the self and institutions (Ball et al, 2002b, pp.52-3). Such decisions are largely based on the perceived 'fit' between the individual and the university's habituses. Ball et al suggest that HE choice is a 'lifestyle' choice and a matter of 'taste', both of which are governed by social class (Ball et al, 2002b, p.53). In a similar way, students who do not choose university may be making a 'lifestyle choice'. In addition to the perceived risks and cost of participation in HE for working-class students (Archer and Hutchings, 2000), Archer et al (2007) argue that a young working-class person's habitus, specifically their embodied identities - or 'presentations of style' - may influence them to reject university. Archer et al explain that 'performances of style' are classed and 'oppositional' to the 'ideal' (university) student, making HE 'unthinkable' (Archer et al, 2007, p.221). In light of recent findings on fear of student debt and debates surrounding the 'value' of some degree courses, there would seem more significant reasons for students' rejection of HE. Nonetheless, Archer et al's study of the influence of a student's individual habitus on their post-school choosing usefully contributes to our understanding of why some moderate attainers may feel university 'is not for me'.

David et al's (2003) study of family involvement in the processes of HE choosing found that mothers were more involved than fathers. This involvement was classed, with middle and lower middle-class mothers more 'pragmatic' and 'intensively involved' than upper middle-class mothers. David et al found that highly educated, 'elite families' tended to have an affinity with the private schools chosen for their children and therefore could afford a 'hands off' and 'professional approach' to their offspring's HE choosing (David et al, 2003, p.29). The familial habitus could be seen to shape HE choice in quite distinctive ways: while the middle classes attempted to reproduce their own educational patterns, working-class parents wanted to transform their children's educational fates' (David et al, 2003, p.29).

Since much of the research on the influence of institutional and familial habitus on HE choosing was carried out, the lifting of the cap on student numbers has produced a further expansion of the HE market. The competition for credentials from 'elite' universities can only intensify (Brown, 1995). Consequently, the 'value' of high attainers to schools will also increase, especially where progression to prestigious universities serves as valuable marketing. In this context, any lack of 'fit' between the familial and institutional habitus may be less of an issue than it once was. As long as high attainers are willing to have their HE aspirations steered towards those desired by their school, the school will wish to invest in their HE choosing. In this way, a school may compensate for any lack of familial cultural capital. By contrast, moderately attaining young people who aspire to non-Russell Group universities and who lack a graduate family background will be particularly disadvantaged (Reay et al, p.62; see also Archer, 2000; Hutchings and Archer, 2001). For these students, a lack of 'fit' between the familial and institutional habituses (Reay et al, 2005, p.38) will be all the more evident as competition to facilitate high attainers applications to 'elite' institutions intensifies and choices are made over the distribution of resources for the HE process.

Cultural capital

As Reay et al (2005) argue, middle class students, and especially those with university educated parents, make their HE choices with the security of both school and parental support. Of further advantage to the middle-class student is the possession of relevant cultural capital (Reay et al, 2005, p.21). Bourdieu explains cultural capital as 'long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body' (1986, p.17) and argues that the amount and type of cultural capital inherited from the family background will influence academic success more than any 'natural aptitud(e)' (Bourdieu, 1986, p.17). In addition, the possession of relevant cultural capital makes it possible for middle class families to discriminate between types of knowledge when making school and university choices. Ball and Vincent (1998) conceptualised information used by parents in the school choice-making process as 'hot' and 'cold' knowledge. They found that parents relied on 'hot' or 'grapevine' knowledge gained through first or second-hand experience, more than 'cold', official knowledge, such as league tables, Ofsted reports or prospectuses. Middle class parents, with higher amounts of the requisite cultural capital, were able to discriminate more successfully

in their use of 'grapevine' knowledge, and factored into their choosing well-sourced forms of 'cold' knowledge (Ball and Vincent, 1998, p.382). Middle-class HE choosers behave similarly, and are able to:

contextualise personal recommendations within a whole spectrum of hard data [and] more reliable soft data such as family members' experiences.

(Reay et al, 2005, p.153)

Additionally, Reay et al (2005) found that students 'at the two ends of the social spectrum' believed 'grapevine' knowledge to be 'more salient than official information' (p.152). Successful accessing of 'hot' knowledge points to the possession of both relevant cultural capital (discriminatory knowledge) and social capital, in the form of useful family 'connections' (Bourdieu, 1986, p.16). Just as middle-class students may avail of 'hot' knowledge for HE choosing, Reay et al's findings hint at the potential for working-class students being able to access 'hot' knowledge for non-HE choices. It is likely that working-class families with the relevant cultural capital will be more discriminating than schools about what constitutes 'hot' knowledge of work or training. Similarly, some may have access to local networks with relevant 'hot' knowledge about opportunities for alternatives to HE. It may be argued that such types of cultural and social capital are of a 'lower order' than types of capital possessed by the middle classes because they relate to working-class employment. However, where school discourses preclude support for students who choose alternatives to HE, moderate attainers who seek alternatives to HE may be able to navigate their way to useful support for their post-school choosing, in spite of a lack of school support for their non-HE aspirations.

Conclusion

The intention of this review of the literature has been to explain how moderately attaining school sixth formers are differentiated within a policy context which includes fair access, tuition fees and a lack of careers advice for young people. Due to the absence of literature focused on moderately attaining sixth formers, I have discussed research in lower secondary which offers insights into how sixth form selective practices may arise. Moderately attaining sixth formers risk being particularly disadvantaged by current policies which encourage schools to focus on high attainers, their subject choices, and their applications to 'elite' universities.

Research to date has yet to reflect the subtle ways in which students may be formally and informally sorted by attainment at sixth form level. However, the research on sorting by attainment at GCSE level, and especially that which considers the influence of setting on pedagogic practice and teacher expectations, offers important insights which are relevant for selective practices at sixth form level. Gillborn and Youdell's (2000) study of the GCSE A*- C economy and school practices designed to maximise performance seems especially useful. The dominance of the fair access policy, reinforced by more prescriptive sixth form accountability and performance measures (such as sixth form league tables), all suggest conditions ripe for a similar 'rationing' of A level resources.

The dominance of the fair access discourse may also be seen in research on A level subject choice which focuses on the uptake of facilitating A level subjects and/or university subject preferences. In addition to GCSE attainment, research identifies factors such as school type, social class and the search for something 'new and exciting' (Vidal-Rodeiro, 2007, P.7), which affect students' A level subject choosing. It is possible to draw from Vidal-Rodeiro's large study the subject preferences of moderate attainers for 'newer' and vocational subjects. However, all the research on subject choice, including the most recent study by Dilnot (2016), was carried out before the Government introduced its most recent performance indicator of AAB in at least two facilitating subjects. This has placed school sixth forms under increasing pressure to restrict their subject offer to traditional subjects, with little to incentivise schools to offer a 'newer' and vocational subjects popular with many moderate attainers.

Bourdieu (1993) states that the habitus 'constantly performs an adaptation to the external world which only exceptionally takes the form of a radical conversion' (p.88). Similarly, a school's institutional habitus must adapt to the pace of newly introduced performance measures. Although the work of Reay (1998) and Reay et al (2005) on the influence of institutional habitus on students' HE choosing was carried out before the fair access policy and its particular focus on access to 'elite' universities, it remains highly relevant to the current policy context. In particular, the finding that the institutional habitus of schools is mobilised differentially for different attainment groups. It seems likely that this will be intensified by new performance measures and sixth form league tables. In this context, Oliver and

Kettley's (2010) concept of teacher habitus would seem eminently useful for examining how teacher may act as either 'gatekeepers' or 'facilitators' for applications to less selective HEIs.

The literature which examines the current provision of careers advice highlights another area where schools may be failing to support moderate attainers' with their post-school choosing. Especially significant is Coiffait's (2013) finding that the majority of school sixth forms are unaware of their statutory requirements to provide impartial careers advice. So too, is her finding that teachers feel they lack the time and resources to provide advice. As Chadderton (2015) points out, schools have many competing priorities and no incentive to provide impartial advice on different learning routes (p.95). A recent IFS study which throws into question the 'value' of some degree courses to the employment prospects of graduates from lower socio-economic groups (Britton et al, 2016) highlights the significance of a lack of advice for students who might, if better informed, choose an alternative to HE. In addition, is Callender and Mason's (2017) significant finding on the increasing likelihood of student debt being a deterrent to progression to HE among students from lower socio-economic groups.

It is possible to unpick from the literature the many formal and informal ways in which school practices may differentiate resources and sort or select sixth form students. While much of the literature on school practices focuses on the teaching and learning of GCSE pupils, there are findings useful for a critical examination of practices at sixth form level. Current policies which affect school sixth forms, many of which are designed to reinforce fair access, seem to encourage formal and informal selective sixth form practices. The current policy focus on facilitating access to Russell Group universities is putting increasing pressure on schools to divert resources away from students who aspire to less prestigious universities or seek an alternative to HE. Gaps in the literature are due, mostly, to the pace of change at sixth form level and the different political ideologies of recent governments. Nonetheless, except for the substantial and necessary work on students' HE choosing, the experiences of sixth form students appears under-researched. Further, the literature on HE choosing is dominated by the effectiveness of fair access. Moderately attaining sixth formers and their HE and non-HE aspirations, appear outside current research interests. As argued, moderately

attaining students form the majority of most school sixth forms. Their sheer diversity coupled with the range of post-school destination to which they aspire suggests they deserve academic interest. The detrimental impact of recent policies on the educational experiences and post-school aspirations make research into this group a matter of social justice.

CHAPTER 3

Methodology

Introduction

In this chapter I outline my methodology and explain why I chose to research three school sixth forms using ethnographic methods. I discuss some of the issues involved in devising my research questions, and how my initial findings prompted me to refine my area of research (Green, 2008, p. 50). I explain how I selected my schools and my research participants. I describe the social and cultural contexts of each school and how access was gained. I then discuss relations in the field, and some of the issues I experienced with gatekeepers and school ‘safeguarding’ practices. I then describe my data collection methods and conclude with a section on ethical considerations.

Research Questions

The purpose of clear and focused research questions is that they serve as ‘tools for discovery’ (Agee, 2009, p.446). In formulating my research questions, I drew on my Master’s study on the influence of school habitus on support for HE choosing. This raised some ‘foreshadowed problems’ (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, p.28) about the ways different schools organised support for students’ HE choosing and helped to map out my area of doctoral research on support for differently attaining groups. My three original aims were to investigate how schools select their Russell Group candidates, how HE support differed for high and moderately attaining students who aspired to HE, and how moderate attainers’ experienced the support they received.

However, as Agee (2009) explains, developing research questions is both a reflective and interrogative process (p.431), and early on in my research interviews with moderate attainers I discovered that some were ambivalent about progressing to university. Willis and Trondman (2000) argue that ethnographic methods have the capacity to ‘surprise’ (Willis, 2005), prompting us to ‘new’ knowledge and a refinement of our theoretical positions (Willis and Trondman, 2000, p. 8). My surprise prompted a broadening of my research to include ‘non-conformers’ – students who rejected their school’s emphasis on progression to HE. Not only did

they challenge assumptions about students' aspirations, but they also promised to throw light on the provision of support for alternative progression routes beyond school for differently attaining groups. I decided my research questions should focus on two key areas:

- Does support for university and/or alternatives to university choice-making differ for high and moderately attaining students and, if so, how?
- What are the formal procedures and wider processes through which moderately attaining students come to make their HE and non-HE, choices, and how do they experience the guidance and support they are given with their choice-making?²⁰

My research questions, 'flagged' by key words (Green, 2008, p.53) - processes, procedures, experiences – were simple enough to be kept firmly in mind as I worked in the field, observing, interviewing and making fieldnotes, and, in this way, served as tools for working in the field.

Why ethnography?

I first came across ethnographic research through reading Philippe Bourgois' (2002) study of Harlem crack dealers and Leslie Salzinger's (2002) participant observation of Mexican women factory workers while still a teacher. Later, during the course of my Master's research, I came across Valerie Hey's (2002) study of schoolgirl friendships and Paul Willis' (1980) study of the schooling of working class boys. I was intrigued by the idea that this immersive way of conducting research was an established form of academic study. Possibly, a life-long love of literature and my time as a teacher of English made me particularly responsive to ethnography because it seemed to tell a story. Studying the sociology of education led me to Stephen Ball's (1981) *Beachside* and Shamus Khan's (2011) *Privilege*. I found Khan's (2011) approach to researching an elite American school particularly helpful, especially his desire to 'to ask the kind of questions' Bourdieu might ask (Khan, 2011, pp.203-4). For me, ethnographic research feels the most 'natural' way of conducting research. It answers two of my driving impulses: to communicate on

²⁰ See Appendix E for my original research questions.

issues of educational injustice and to tell a story which others might want to read. The seriousness of embarking on an ethnographic study for a doctorate also ensured the necessary focus and discipline which mere story telling does not satisfy.

As well as learning from previous substantive research, I was guided by Willis and Trondman's (2000) 'theoretically informed methodology for ethnography' (TIME). Willis and Trondman describe a way of researching the 'lived culture' of schools and 'worldly experiences' of participants – the 'nitty gritty' of everyday life (p.11) - which is 'enabling' and 'sensitizing', both theoretically and methodologically (Willis and Trondman, 2000, p.5). I was also guided by Khan's (2011) ethnographic practice. Khan lived and worked at his school, observed its 'workings' and talked to people (Khan, 2011, p.201). He argues that true understanding can only be achieved through 'deep embedding' (Khan, 2011, p.202), and that

[to] stand outside people, looking in at their lives as if they were some laboratory or snow globe, is to not understand them.

(Khan, 2001, p.201)

At the same time, however, Khan is clear that it is not possible to 'simply observe relations unfettered by theoretical questions' (Khan, 2011, p.203). Equally, Willis and Trondman (2000) argue that the 'the 'nitty gritty of everyday life cannot be presented as raw, unmediated data' any more than it can 'through abstract theoretical categories' (p.12). When planning my research I was interested in exploring the influence of institutional habitus (Reay, 1998; Reay et al, 2005), and teacher habitus (Oliver and Kettley, 2010) on student's HE choosing, and was concerned that these were not reflected explicitly in my research questions. However, my reading of Khan, Willis and Trondman helped me to realise that it was possible to investigate and test some ideas in relation to what I encountered in the field without setting out to 'test a theory' (see Khan, 2011, p.203).

Conducting an ethnographic study that was theoretically informed, as opposed to theoretically driven, allowed me to research in a way that was intimate and responsive, but also reflexive. In particular, it allowed me to retain a capacity for curiosity and surprise. When researching a setting familiar to us, Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) argue that it should be treated as 'anthropologically strange' in order to make explicit any presuppositions we might take for granted (p.9). My own

position fell somewhere between Khan's total immersion in the everyday culture of the school as a researcher/teacher and Hammersley and Atkinson's researcher who understands the school 'from within and captures it as external to and independent of' herself (p.9). As a former secondary teacher, it was easier for me 'fit in' and move around unnoticed when wearing my researcher's hat. I was also able to discuss certain processes, such as UCAS applications, with students and teachers in ways that would seem unintelligible to an outsider.²¹ However, when necessary, I was able to make familiar processes 'anthropologically strange' by asking questions a teacher would be assumed to know. For example, questions about the function of form periods gave me insight into teachers' perceptions of the value of time devoted to the pastoral care of students.

Willis and Trondman's 'Manifesto' allowed me to be creative and responsive in the field, engaging meaningfully with students and teachers, while remaining critical. It also demanded that I write about my findings in a way that was rigorous and reflexive, and which respected the experiences and feelings of my student and teacher participants.

Introduction to the field

My schools – their socio-economic and academic contexts

I was interested in the impact of selective practices on moderately attaining sixth formers in the context of an increasingly competitive school sixth form market. There were six schools where I felt I might gain access: all were schools where I had either taught, conducted my Masters' research, and/or conducted voluntary workshops on HE choosing. Two of these six schools sent very few students to Russell Group universities and the third had a sixth form with only 90 girls. I suspected from my Master's research that differences in attainment were related to levels of support given for post-school choosing. None of these three schools offered a sufficient mix of attainers to test this idea and so were excluded. Two of the remaining three schools had formed part of my Master's research. One of these was the mixed, multi-ethnic comprehensive, Hallingford. The other was a single sex, independent, selective and multi-ethnic school, Parklands. In both schools, relations

²¹ Terms that may not be understood by those unfamiliar with the UCAS system include 'Clearing' and 'Adjustment' (see Appendix D).

with the heads of sixth form were good and therefore choosing them straightforward. I had also formed good relations with Mrs Jay, the Head of Sixth Form at St John's, a mixed Church of England academy, while conducting voluntary workshops on personal statement writing at the school. Mrs Jay's active interest in improving support for her sixth formers' post-school choosing meant she was very positive towards me conducting research in her sixth form. Unlike Parklands and Hallingford, St John's is predominantly white and Christian and enjoys a reputation for being the state school of choice in the area, and especially for aspirant working and middle-class families. I therefore chose St John's as my third school.

All three schools were situated in and around Greater London and typical of a significant proportion in England where progression to university is assumed to be the norm, and advertising the opportunities to progress to Russell Group/Oxbridge universities important for attracting students. Although the schools shared a common orientation towards higher education, they promised some interesting comparisons in terms of school type, the socio-economic mix of students and staff, and academic ethos. For this reason, I decided not to include the single highly selective state sixth form college in the area where I conducted my research. The college has a reputation as an 'exam factory' and 'cream skims' sixth forms across six different boroughs.²² I felt it to be atypical of other school sixth forms. In addition, as a sole researcher the addition of a fourth institution would have been challenging.

Hallingford

The first of my schools was Hallingford, an ethnically diverse, mixed comprehensive situated in an area of high social deprivation in Greater London. It was graded 'Outstanding' by Ofsted in 2011. The student population is predominantly working-class and mainly comprised of first and second generation South Asian students, as well as a growing number of first generation Somali students. There are also small minorities of West African, Afghan, white English and Polish students (information given by Hallingford's Data Manager, Morgan). Just over half of Hallingford's students are EAL (Gov.UK, 2017a), compared to a borough average of around 30% (DfE, 2017d). The percentage of FSM students is also higher than the borough

²² The college insists it is 'more than just an exam factory' on its website.

average (Gov.UK, 2017a; DfE, 2017d). The percentage of SEN students, however, is just under half the borough average (DfE, 2017d).

Hallingford is hidden behind a small high street which contains a garage, a Tesco Express, a DIY and a discount carpet shop, and a take-away fried chicken outlet. The school is not easily accessible by public transport. Most staff drive to work and park their cars in the maze of roads which surround the school and which contain a mixture of privately owned properties and social housing. While some of the properties are well-kept and pride is taken in their appearance, many of the roads contain more run-down properties studded with satellite dishes and with multiple wheelie bins sitting in driveways. The school appears the one, relatively new building in the area, having moved from its original site in 2007. The school campus comprises separate teaching blocks for the humanities, sciences, music and drama and applied subjects. There is another block for reception and administration and a further block houses the school's sixth form of some 600 students. As well as sixth form classrooms and a small studio which doubles as a lecture hall and performance space, the sixth form has a top floor with three offices, an interview room, the sixth form common room, and learning centre with laptops and internet access. The three offices are occupied by the sixth form team which includes Mr Nelson, the Head of Sixth Form, his secretary, the Deputy Head of Sixth Form, Mr Windsor, and a team of non-teaching support staff. Predominantly female, each has a different area of responsibility: child protection and pastoral issues, 'post 16 administration', special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND), and BTEC students. A non-teaching male member of staff is responsible for the pastoral care of Somali boys, and a subject teacher is responsible for vocational training and work experience.

During one of my earliest visits to Hallingford, Mr Windsor explained that a large percentage of the student population came from 'aspirant' families whose migrant or refugee status sometimes obscured middle-class backgrounds. Most students came from families who put a 'high value' on education. Nevertheless, the majority of my research participants came from working class backgrounds with parents who had not been to university. Nine out of the 19 tracked through sixth form also came from single parent families. Three students had university educated parents, of which two were fathers who had attended non-UK universities. One had worked as a war correspondent before being injured and forced into early retirement. Another had

studied in an Afghanistan university but now ran a grocery store. The mother of a third student had studied adult nursing as a mature student at a 'new' university. Mr Windsor expressed his opinion that as Hindu and Sikh families prospered and moved out of the area, Hallingford's reputation as an academically successful school was likely to suffer. Similar views were expressed by members of the sixth form team.

St John's

My second school was St John's, a mixed Church of England academy in a commuter suburb of Greater London. At the time of my research, the sixth form had 336 students. The school was graded 'Outstanding' in its last full Ofsted inspection in 2007. Then, Ofsted reported that the majority of students came from 'socially advantaged backgrounds' with few entitled to free school meals (Ofsted, 2007). Recent government figures show that St John's ranks as having the lowest percentage of FSM, ethnic minority and EAL students of all the state-funded secondary schools in the borough (DfE, 2017d Gov.UK, 2017a). However, the school's proportion of SEN students is in line with the borough average. While St John's student population is predominantly white and middle class, a long-standing member of staff, Miss Quick, told me that the school had seen an increase in ethnic minority students and white working-class sixth formers in recent years. Miss Quick felt that this had something to do with St John's reputation as a 'good' school, helped by its status as a Church school with a reputation for 'getting students to university'. She stated, 'You don't get racism, here. It's all about class'. Miss Quick told me that students who lived in the more disadvantaged areas of the borough avoided giving their postcode. My own research revealed that the first two letters of the student's home postcode indicated whether they lived in the more affluent north or more disadvantaged south of the borough. Parents' occupations suggested student participants came from moderately affluent middle and lower middle-class backgrounds, with a small minority of working-class students.

Compared to the run-down area in which Hallingford is situated, St John's is in an area of relative affluence. It sits in the heart of numerous suburban avenues of detached and semi-detached owner-occupied 1930s and 1940s houses. St John's was re-located and re-built in the early 2000s. The school has excellent facilities including a drama studio, state of the art science labs and a large, modern cafeteria,

which is a popular meeting place for students. Works of art by students decorate the walls, and there are leather sofas in a large area that surrounds the main stairway, where students meet and chat. The Sixth Form is on the top floor of one of the two main blocks which make up the school. It consists of a sixth form common room and 'library' (there are no books, only laptops), and a small, cramped sixth form office which houses the Head of Sixth Form, Mrs Jay, her assistant, Miss Harrison, and Deputy Head of Sixth Form, Mr Collins. Miss Harrison's role covers pastoral and administrative assistance to Mrs Jay, often acting as 'surrogate mum' (Miss Harrison), or counsellor to sixth formers.

Reminders of the school's Christian ethos are visible around the school. There are short prayers on noticeboards and the assembly hall doubles as a chapel. It is not unusual to see Christian artefacts left out on an altar in the school's main hall on certain days of the week. A small number of year 12 students complained about the Christian focus of many of the school's sixth form assemblies. Miss Harrison told me that she understood most of St John's teaching staff were church-going Christians, but that she was not. Sixth formers make an annual trip to undertake voluntary work in an African missionary school which St John's has adopted as a charitable project.

On interviewing form tutors responsible for my student cohort, I was interested that one, Mrs Barker, self-identified as working class and described her working-class students in a way which suggested that she felt a particular affinity with them. She described how her own children failed to get into St John's and believed it was because she worshiped at a Pentecostal Church and was not deemed 'the right kind of Christian'. Two teachers were at pains to explain how, as working-class pupils, they had won places at their local grammar schools. Both blamed a lack of support for their university choosing for attending non-Russell Group universities. I did not meet the same anxiety about educational or class status in my other schools. It suggested to me that Miss Quick's description of St John's classism was plausible.

Parklands

My third school was Parklands, a single sex, selective independent day school with a diverse multi-ethnic school population and a sixth form of 340 boys. Roughly 92% of Parklands boys progress to Russell Group universities each year. During the time

of my research, an average of 35 (i.e. about 20%) progressed to Oxbridge annually. Three-quarters of students in Years 7 to 11 and half the students in the sixth form are described as 'far above average' (Independent School Inspectorate, 2011). The school has a strong reputation for Maths, Sciences and Economics. In addition to a Head of Sixth Form, Mrs Dawson, and her Deputy, Dr Tremain, the sixth form team includes a Head and Deputy Head of Careers, Mrs Pearson and Miss Asher. Miss Asher is responsible for organising the Year 11 Morrisby test, a psychometric test which helps parents and boys make appropriate A level subject choices for their later HE aspirations. She also organises work experience placements which take place after GCSEs. The careers department has the support of a small administrative team, comprising one part-time and one full time member of staff.

Parklands is situated in the Home Counties, on the edges of Greater London. It is set in extensive grounds which include cricket and rugby pitches, astro-turf playing fields and a small woodland used for Combined Cadet Force (CCF) training. A listed building houses the administrative staff and a mixture of modern and pre-fab buildings houses the teaching departments. One or two of the blocks date from the 1960s and are evidently in need of rebuilding. By contrast, there are 'state of the art' science labs and a music block which houses practice and teaching rooms and a performance space complete with specially-designed acoustics. Generally, KS3 and KS4 classes comprise a maximum of 24 students. Popular A level subjects, such as Economics, have multiple sets. Some boys said classes such as Maths and some of the sciences were set 'by ability'. Staff questioned about this insisted any setting at sixth form level was for practical reasons determined by boys' other subject choices and timetabling.

Parklands offers rugby, cricket, football, hockey and water polo. Boys also have the option of badminton, shooting and fencing, and a few play golf to a very high standard. There is also CCF, which is optional. There are numerous societies such as those devoted to debating, politics, law, and history. The school's extensive social capital brings a rich variety of high-profile speakers, including politicians, lawyers, scientists and published authors. There is a strong sense of loyalty to the school and a thriving old boys' association. Many of the students interviewed referred to the 'Parks bubble' to explain the character of their high-attaining, multi-cultural school. The 'bubble' is used most frequently to explain the rarefied academic, high-attaining

environment. However, the ‘bubble’ also allows for a particular type of racial tolerance at Parklands. To the outsider, banter can appear close to the bone, or even racist. Boys assured me that within the ‘bubble’ of Parklands this was acceptable but that if the same kind of humour or language were used outside the Parks ‘bubble’, or by a stranger, it would be entirely another matter. Moving around the school, student friendship groups appear to be both mixed and along ethnic and/or cultural lines. During its last inspection (2011), the Independent Schools Inspectorate (ISI) made special mention of the ease of relationships within Parklands’ multi-cultural school community. The multi-cultural ethos of the school can also be seen in student-led weekly Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, and Sikh assemblies, which run at the same time as Roman Catholic and Christian Union prayers and a non-denominational ‘Headmaster’s Assembly’. Pupils are free to attend any of these assemblies.

Many features point to Parklands’ identity as a ‘typical’ public school. Prefects wear gowns and boys play a fast and furious playground ball game, apparently unique to the school, and similar in style to Eton’s ‘Fives’. Boys of all ages participate in this game during break times. In addition to its many clubs and societies, Parklands boasts a successful track record at the annual Model United Nations (MUN).²³ The school regularly wins national debating and public speaking competitions and also excels in bridge, chess and maths competitions. There are bursaries for high attaining students who excel in the entrance examination but whose parents cannot afford the fees. However, generally, the school is dominated by middle-class boys from prosperous, rather than rich, families. Many of the boys are from the new, aspirant middle class made up of economically successful immigrant families. Many have fathers who work in finance or who run their own businesses. A couple among my research participants had parents who were solicitors and one had a father who was a barrister. Three participants had parents who worked in journalism and/or the media. Most had mothers who did not work. Out of my 13 research participants, three had

²³ Model United Nations is an extra-curricular activity in which students typically roleplay delegates to the United Nations and simulate UN committees at MUN conferences, held around the world. School and university students across the world participate in activities which involve researching, public speaking, debating, writing skills, critical thinking, and teamwork and leadership skills. Outstanding delegates are recognized and awarded (<http://bestdelegate.com/what-is-model-united-nations/>).

parents neither of whom had gone to university, and one had a mother who had studied at a polytechnic.

Reasons for including Parklands

As an independent school, Parklands is not subject to the demands of government accountability and performance measures. Unlike Hallingford and St John's, Parklands does not suffer the pressures of competing in a heated sixth form market where student numbers are essential to sixth form funding. The advantages of being a fee-paying school meant that Parklands was able to draw on significantly more resources to support students and their HE aspirations. Parklands' advantages meant a comparative study of all three schools was not felt to be fair or helpful; it became clear that Hallingford and St John's should form the primary focus of my research. Nonetheless, support for HE choosing in Parklands helped identify the gaps in support for moderate attainers at my other schools. In particular, the school's willingness to support and encourage the aspirations of moderate attainers who did not conform to Parklands' strongly academic HE discourse. Importantly also, Parklands' structure of support throughout the HE process helped to illuminate weaknesses in the organisation of support at Hallingford and St John's. In the following chapters, therefore, I refer to Parklands only where I believe useful comparisons may be made.

Accessing my schools

Access to Parklands and Hallingford was first gained in 2012 for my Master's research. I had also taught in both schools in the past. I gained access to my third school, St John's, through befriending the sixth form management team while running voluntary workshops on personal statement writing. I was known and trusted by some influential members of staff, and this made it relatively easy to gain access. Formal permission to conduct research in each of my schools was granted by the heads of sixth form. I presented my research topic as one concerned with how schools helped students to make their HE choices. This disguised my key research question which aimed to investigate how sixth form selective practices shaped the choices of moderate attainers who aspired to HE or alternatives to HE. As Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) point out, fully informed consent is not always desirable (p.42). However, as relationships in the field developed, I was able to talk

more freely about my interest in students of ‘middling’ attainment and their aspirations. The only hostility to my research focus came in interviews with some senior teachers when I asked direct questions about the level of support offered to moderate attainers which suggested unequal differentiation. This is discussed in Chapter 6.

Safeguarding

The initial ease with which I was given access to all three of my schools, however, did not prevent certain challenges to access once my research had started. As Burgess (1991) states,

Gaining access to a research site is not a one-off event; it is instead a continual process that occurs throughout a research project.

(Burgess, 1991, p.52)

Safeguarding, the term used to refer to the necessary checks and procedures used to vet visitors for their suitability to work with young and vulnerable people, was implemented differently in each of my schools. While Hallingford were strict about their initial checks, once my DBS record was found to be clear, I was given a visitor’s pass which allowed me to move around the school unescorted.²⁴

Safeguarding rules at St John’s and Parklands were stricter and appeared symptomatic of a ‘stranger danger’ discourse. At times during my research, I had cause to wonder if safeguarding rules might be used as a pretext to limit a researcher’s freedom of movement.

Standard safeguarding procedure in most schools entails having a DBS checked, signing in and out of school every day, and wearing a visitor’s badge. Initially at St John’s, and halfway through my research in Parklands, I came across members of staff whose implementation of safeguarding rules was so inflexible that I felt that my research might be compromised. At St John’s and Parklands, I had to wait in reception every morning to be picked up before I could start my day and could not leave school until delivered back to reception to sign out. I also had to be escorted everywhere I went. This meant someone had to be found to escort me to and from

²⁴ DBS - Disclosure and Barring Service. Teachers, any school worker and any other type of worker with young and/or vulnerable people must be registered with the government’s DBS service. For many schools DBS clearance is a requirement to be on site.

classroom observations, form periods and assemblies; I also had to be escorted to and from the bathroom. In addition, at St John's, Miss Harrison, to whom Mrs Jay had delegated responsibility for helping me organise my research, assumed the right to sit in on interviews with students. In both schools, greater freedom of movement was achieved through the intervention of sympathetic gatekeepers willing to 'bend the rules' and access re-negotiated (see Rankin, 2016, p.83). I discuss safeguarding at St John's and Parklands in more detail in Appendix F.

In what follows, I explain how access was gained in each of my schools and describe some key relationships in the field. I discuss relations with student participants in my section on interviewing, further on.

Hallingford

Gaining access to Hallingford was greatly eased by having established good relations with Mr Nelson while researching for my Master's dissertation. Once my DBS record was found to be clear, I was given a green coloured badge which told everyone I was a visitor who was authorised to move around the school unaccompanied. There were, nonetheless, two everyday challenges I encountered in Hallingford. The first was Mr Nelson. Gurney (1991) describes her difficulties as a female researcher maintaining rapport in a male-dominated setting. She explains,

I wanted to avoid at any cost doing anything that might damage my rapport with my hosts...I felt a sense of gratitude toward [them]. In addition, I did not want to appear ungrateful.

(Gurney, 1991, p.59)

Although working in a very different context to Gurney, her need to appease when confronted with certain types of men while in the field is one I recognise from my time at Hallingford. For example, I once happened to be chatting with some women in the sixth form office about cooking. I am not particularly interested in cooking, but cooking was an area where I was able to build relationships. My entry into this small group was my knowledge of vegan recipes. On one occasion, I was explaining a dish when Mr Nelson burst in demanding to be invited to supper so that I could prove my culinary skills. I laughed this off but demands to be invited to supper came up more than once during the course of my research in Hallingford.

The other challenge in negotiating daily access at Hallingford was the strength of inter-departmental rivalry and the competition between some staff members for coveted management positions in the sixth form office. As Burawoy (2009) notes,

once inserted into a specific location, the competences of the ethnographer play a crucial role in dictating the way she or he is viewed and, in turn, views others.

(Burawoy, 2009, p.37)

It took all my inter-personal skills to keep on good terms with different members of staff at Hallingford, especially with the women who administered the sixth form. To be seen to be friendly with some members of sixth form staff risked compromising my relationships with others, limiting my access to 'gatekept' information relating to timetables and students' contact details. In addition, there was rivalry between Mr Nelson and some form tutors over the control of the university applications of high attainers, especially Oxbridge applications. Hallingford was a 'complex site' which looked very 'different seen from different places within it' (Burawoy, 2009, P. 37). Some staff were genuinely welcoming and interested in my research, while others appeared wary, uncertain of my relationship to Mr Nelson and/or key members of the sixth form team, and whether I could be trusted. Sharing some of the challenges I had experienced as a teacher supporting students' HE choosing helped me to build trust with two form tutors; however, my position as a researcher in the area of students' HE applications appeared to deter others. On balance, I found the existence of factions within Hallingford to be an advantage. A sympathetic ear meant I learnt a lot about Hallingford 'off the record'. In addition, just as being female made me a target of treatment to which I suspect Mr Nelson would not have subjected a male researcher, it sometimes worked to my advantage with some of the women who worked in the sixth form office. As Finch (1984) found, being female meant I shared with them a subordinate structural position (p.76) in Hallingford's sixth form. As someone who posed little threat in the department's power struggles, I was trusted by most of the women and many confided in me information about the school as well as their personal lives. As mothers of students who had attended Hallingford, some had 'hot knowledge' (Ball and Vincent, 1998) about the ways in which the school differentiated levels of support for HE choosing for different groups which I

used to triangulate my findings from interviews with students. Nevertheless, I was conscious, always of the ‘real exploitative potential in the easily established trust between women’ (Finch, 1984, p.81) and have not used anything that was told to me ‘in confidence’.

St John’s

Although I had built good relations with Head of St John’s Sixth Form, Mrs Jay, and her non-teaching, assistant, Miss Harrison, during visits when delivering voluntary sixth form workshops, establishing my role as a researcher in the school was less straightforward.

As part of an initial visit to St John’s and my observation of St John’s annual UCAS preparation day (UCAS day), I was asked by Mrs Jay to deliver a presentation on personal statement writing. When I turned up for a meeting to organise my presentation, I discovered that the Deputy Head of Sixth Form, Mr Collins, had taken over the organisation of the UCAS day. Mr Collins handed me his plans and I was surprised to see that I was listed as the person delivering a workshop for Oxbridge applicants. When I asked what was being provided for other students who aspired to HE, I was told they would be spending the afternoon with the Territorial Army (TA). Mr Collins’ arrangements gave me ‘new’ knowledge (Willis, 2005) about what some teachers at St John’s believed was appropriate when it came to preparing different groups for their UCAS applications. Mr Collins appeared to be going against the wishes of Mrs Jay. As my primary gatekeeper, I was keen not to sully my relations with Mrs Jay. My solution was to email both Mr Collins and Mrs Jay explaining that I would prefer not to be associated with any one group of students before I started my research. I offered to run a workshop for Russell Group applicants in which I would include advice for Oxbridge students, but asked to be able to also run workshops for other students who aspired to HE. Mrs Jay suggested we revert to her original plan for a year 12 presentation.

Late in the summer term of 2014, before the start of my research, I presented on making a UCAS application to an audience which included members of St John’s senior management, teachers and the school’s year 12. I felt that both my position as a prospective researcher in the school and my expertise were under scrutiny, and that I needed to present myself in a way that was acceptable to Mr Collins. I also wanted

to present myself as someone to whom students would feel at ease talking. Shaffir (1991) writes about the ‘tactics of self-presentation’ and notes that a measure of role-playing and acting are required when researching in the field (p.77). My talk on personal statement writing involved juggling different roles in order to come across as both professional and likeable. This turned out to be ‘nerve-wrecking and exhausting’ (Shaffir, 1991, p.77). However, owing to the number of years I have supported students with their university applications in schools, my knowledge of the technical side of the UCAS application is extensive. This helped to establish my ‘credentials’ to any members of staff tempted to dismiss me as an academic without practical experience. In addition, I had worked hard to create a PowerPoint presentation that was both informative and attractive. I was asked to give similar presentations more than once while at St John’s, which suggested this first presentation was deemed a success.

Parklands

Accessing Parklands was helped by the fact that I was a former teacher and had conducted my Master’s research there. I was fortunate also that a former colleague, Mrs Dawson, was now Head of Sixth Form, and I had also worked under Parklands’ Head of Careers, Mrs Pearson. Both were generous in the access they gave me to the school and with their response to any queries. Researching in Parklands was initially very straightforward. Many former colleagues remembered me and were generous with their time. However, at the beginning of my students’ year 13, the return from a sabbatical of a senior manager, Mr Carr, threatened my access. Mr Carr had introduced a strict safeguarding regime before his sabbatical and on his return, I was suddenly subjected to new security checks. Access was renegotiated with the help of friendly gatekeepers who were willing to ‘bend the rules’ of Mr Carr’s safeguarding regime (see Appendix F).

Selecting my student samples

At Hallingford and Parklands I was given relative freedom to choose my students. At St John’s this was not the case. In this section, I explain how I recruited student participants in each school.

Becker (1998) describes sampling

as a kind of synecdoche, in which we want the part of a population or organization or system we have studied to be taken to represent, meaningfully, the whole from which it was drawn.

(Becker, 1998, p. 67)

Becker warns that the problem with a 'synecdoche' or sampling, is that the 'part' may not be as representative as we would like, may not reproduce the characteristics we are interested in, or may not even allow us to draw conclusions that can be generalised (Becker, 1998, p.67). I tried to navigate around such problems by selecting students with a broad range of attainment and by conducting my research in three different types of school, each with a very different socio-economic mix of students. In this way, I hoped to have credible samples. However, selecting a sample of research participants in each of my sixth forms had to be done within the constraints of what was possible. As well as having a mix of high and moderate attainers, I also needed moderate attainers who were at the higher and lower end of moderate GCSE attainment (see Chapter 1, for my classifications of high and moderate attainment). My final samples comprised the following mix of high and moderately attaining students.

Table 1

Attainment groupings by school					
School	Moderate attainers (‘lower end’ - mostly Bs and Cs at GCSE)	Moderate attainers (‘higher end’ - mostly As and Bs at GCSE)	High attainer (min. 5 A/A*s at GCSE)	Total students at start of year 12	Total tracked to post- school desti- nation
Hallingford	8	5	6	19	19
St John’s	6	6	6	18	16 (2 drop outs)
Parklands	6	4	8	18	13 (5 drop outs) ²⁵

Hallingford

During the course of my Master’s research, Hallingford’s Head of Sixth Form, Mr Nelson, was generous with the access he gave me. However, at the same time, he appeared keen to steer me towards certain students. Mr Nelson also had a habit of dropping in on interviews unannounced and I suspected that during my doctoral research he might try to keep me under a regime of casual surveillance. I was surprised therefore when Mr Nelson did not involve himself in the selection of my sample for my doctoral study. Instead, he asked Morgan, Hallingford’s data manager, to assist me with the selection of my sample using the school’s Student Information Management System (SIMS). With Morgan’s assistance, I was given the same access to SIMS as all Hallingford teachers. The advantage of this was that I could see the GCSE attainment of every year 12 student and was free to select my sample of high and moderate attainers from the whole year. Morgan also used filters to ensure I had a good mix of male and female students and a broad ethnic mix in each of my attainment groups.

²⁵ Drop outs – students who left the research (no information on post-school destinations).

In addition to GCSE grades, Hallingford's SIMS recorded a 'target grade' for every student. I was surprised by the number of students who had a target grade of 'C' or 'D', in spite of attaining several As at GCSE. Morgan explained that Hallingford purposely underestimated students' target grades at the start of year 12, 'to make them aspire'. My high attainers therefore included five of the very small number of students who had a target grade of B, and a group of 15 moderate attainers with target grades of C and D. Twenty students was more than I needed but Morgan encouraged me to 'go large' as it was possible some would not want to take part and/or some would drop out. I also hoped that larger numbers would increase the 'typicality' of my sample (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, p. 34).

Contact was made with students during form periods. I was unable to make contact with two moderate attainers and two others did not want to participate. Through snowballing, I gained two replacement moderate attainers. In Year 13, I gained a high attainer. As Bryman (2001) describes, the advantage of snowballing is the 'fit' (Bryman, 2001, p.99). Research participants introduced me to students whose experiences added valuable knowledge to my understanding of the field. During my research in Hallingford I tracked a total of 18 students to their post school destinations. Eight proved particularly forthcoming in interview and became key to my research. They included two high attainers and six moderate attainers. My Hallingford sample group comprised the following:

Table 2

Hallingford - make up of student sample²⁶			
Moderate attainers ('lower end' – mostly Bs and Cs at GCSE)	Moderate attainers ('higher end' – mostly As and Bs, at GCSE)	High attainers (Five A*/As at GCSE)	Total
8	5	6	19
Dale, Zane , Karim, Hari, Mahnoor , Neena, Ravi, Stacey (Ravi left for college at end of year 12 - lost contact)	Adela , Kyle, Naz , Tim, Shafia (Kyle left for college at the end of year 12 but remained in contact)	Asmit , Bival, Fahima , Kirti, Sumeer , Tony	

²⁶ Students in bold were 'key' research participants.

St John's

As a friendly gatekeeper, I believe Miss Harrison, assistant to Head of Sixth Form, Mrs Jay, acted in my best interests, as she saw them. She willingly gave me access to student and teacher timetables, useful telephone numbers and potentially receptive sixth form tutors. However, Miss Harrison's involvement in selecting my sample made me wonder if she wanted to steer me towards an 'ideal' group of St John's students.

In an initial email to Miss Harrison, I explained my interest in researching high and moderate attainers who aspired to university and asked for the opportunity to present to year 12 students and to ask for volunteers. Miss Harrison responded with an email which read, 'Leave it to me'. A few days later, Miss Harrison emailed with a date. I knew St John's year 12 comprised 190 students and was therefore surprised on the day of my presentation to find myself in front of 30 pre-selected students. The profile of my eventual group suggested that Miss Harrison acted in good faith – there was a good mix of high and moderate attainers – but I also strongly suspected that some potential participants had been filtered out. Nevertheless, I was keen to maintain good relations early on in my research and therefore accepted the situation. I hoped to be able to recruit other students later.

Of the 30 students, 18 volunteered to take part in my research. Of these, 12 were moderately attaining students, of whom eight were 'high end' and four were 'low end' moderate attainers, and six were high attainers. The student population of St John's is predominantly white, middle and lower middle class, reflecting the suburban community it serves. Among the 30, year 12 students chosen by Miss Harrison there were just three Black students, all of them boys. I accepted this but was curious about the lack of Black girls. All three boys volunteered to take part in my research.

Missing Black girls

A few weeks after the selection of my student sample, I observed some year 12 Sociology and Psychology classes and noticed a group of Black girls who had not attended my initial presentation. Informal conversations with these girls revealed they were moderate attainers and all aspired to university. None of the girls wanted to be interviewed. However, I sometimes bumped into one of them, Celine, during

my visits to St John's, and she would chat to me about her work and her plan to study Business at university. Another emailed me for help with her personal statement. A casual conversation over coffee with Miss Harrison at the end of my first year in St John's, revealed that she found Black girls 'loud'. I was surprised by this stereotyping which pointed to the possibility of bias in Miss Harrison's original choice of potential participants. A way around the limitations of my sample presented itself through Celine's positive attitude towards her Sociology teacher, Miss Shaw. Students' personal recommendations of Miss Shaw suggested she might be in a position to speak for them. Usefully, Miss Shaw had connections with student 'networks' (see Sturgis, 2008, p.180). It seemed possible that Miss Shaw would have 'hot' knowledge of moderate attainers' experiences, as well as 'inside knowledge' (Watts, 2006) of the school's attitude towards them and their subject choices (see Chapter 4).

Gender imbalance

Owing to student drop outs, my sample became gender imbalanced. Four moderately attaining boys ceased to participate in my research at the end of year 12; one boy left to go to college and another left to take up an apprenticeship, and two stopped participating through lack of interest. My original sample group of 18 became 14 and contained just four boys. However, they represented a wide range of attainment and social backgrounds, including one Black 'working-class' high attainer, a middle-class 'lower end' moderate attainer and two boys I classified as lower middle-class: one a non-conformer and one a 'higher end' moderate attainer'.²⁷ Recruiting more boys at St John's proved far more difficult than girls. Even through snowballing, I met only girls, and a group interview planned with a mixed group of six moderately attaining students ended up taking place with four girls. I came to accept that my method for selecting student participants at St John's was probably closer to what Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) describe as 'convenience sampling', with participants selected because they were available and 'by virtue of (their) accessibility' (p.97). In total, 14 students were tracked to their post-school destinations. Of these, six were moderate attainers and one high attainer were

²⁷ The parents of Kayode were both university educated in Nigeria and had working class jobs. See Appendix C for classifications of social class.

particularly forthcoming in interview. These seven became ‘key’ research participants. My St John’s sample group comprised the following:

Table 3

St John’s - make up of student sample			
Moderate attainers (‘lower end’ – mostly Bs and Cs at GCSE)	Moderate attainers (‘higher end’ – mostly As and Bs, at GCSE)	High attainers (Five A*/As at GCSE)	Total
6	6	6	18
Alistair, Amy , Benny, Erica , Memphis, Michael (Alistair dropped out during year 12; Memphis and Michael left for college at end of year 12 – lost contact; Erica left for college at end of year 12 - remained in contact)	Ella , John, Patrick, Simon , Vicky , Zoe , (John dropped out during year 12)	Alice, Bridget, Kayode, Katie, Judith, Ruth	

Parklands

Finding a sample group of students Parklands, was helped by my relationship with the Head of Sixth Form, Mrs Dawson. A former teaching colleague, she had been instrumental in helping me gain access to Parklands for my Master’s research. When I explained my research interest, Mrs Dawson suggested I include Parklands’ seven lowest GCSE achievers. In a school where six A*s is deemed average, Parklands’ ‘low achievers’ attained mostly As and Bs at GCSE. Parklands’ ‘low achievers’ were therefore of a similar level of attainment as ‘higher end’ Hallingford and St John’s moderate attainers, which promised some useful comparisons. The generally high academic attainment at Parklands meant I had to adjust my classifications. I classified Parklands boys with no A*s at GCSE as ‘lower end’ moderate attainers.

Boys whose attainment included between one and six A*s, mostly A grades and no more than one B, were classified as ‘higher end’ moderate attainers. Parklands’ high attainers attained anything between seven and 11 A*s and no Bs at GCSE.

Early in the Autumn term of my first year in Parklands, I spoke to four form groups about my research and was able to recruit the majority of my student participants. Among those who volunteered to take part were five of the seven ‘low achievers’ whose names had been given to me by Mrs Dawson. In addition, I approached the other two ‘low achievers’ outside these form groups. One did not want to take part and the other, Rishi, was encouraged to take part by his form tutor, Mr Renouf, who felt that experience of talking to another person about his university aspirations might be helpful. My original sample contained 18 students, 13 of whom I was able to track to their post-school destinations. Of these 13, a ‘core’ group of one high attainer, three moderate attainers emerged as key participants and were particularly forthcoming in interview. My Parklands original sample comprised the following:

Table 4

Parklands - make up of student sample			
Moderate attainers (‘lower end’ – no A*s at GCSE)	Moderate attainers (‘higher end’ – some A*s no Bs at GCSE)	High attainers (Between 7 and 11 A*s at GCSE)	Total
6	4	8	18
Ash, Danny , Jacob, Marlon, Rishi, Zac (Ash, Jacob and Marlon left at the end of year 12 for sixth form college and remained in contact)	Charlie, Guy, Jolyon , Suresh (Suresh left for sixth form college at end of year 12 – lost contact)	Crispin, Edward, Gerald , Nathan (Deepak, Ethan, Sajid, William – interviewed once)	

Selecting my teacher samples

In addition to interviewing heads of sixth form and other members of staff involved in the provision of HE advice and careers in each of my three schools, I used snowball sampling to select Hallingford and St John's form tutors. At Parklands, form tutors volunteered to take part in my research. All members of staff who took part in my research from each of my schools were interviewed once. At Hallingford, I interviewed Mr Nelson for a second time with his deputy, Mr Windsor. However, many teachers spoke to me informally throughout my research and offered useful insights into their school's institutional habitus and/or about the support offered to students for their post-school choosing. All the teachers I interviewed were also generous when I had any follow-up questions.

Hallingford

Interviews with Hallingford staff were conducted with the Head and Deputy Head of Sixth Form, four sixth form tutors known to students in my sample group, data manager, Morgan, and Helen, a sixth form assistant responsible for BTEC students. In interview, all four form tutors referred to Hallingford's 'unofficial' hierarchy of form groups based on academic attainment and expected post-school destinations. By coincidence, I discovered that the form tutors were all responsible for form groups of Maths and Sciences students. There was a parallel ranking of form groups for Humanities students. The following Hallingford staff took part in my research:

Table 5

Hallingford staff participants	
Member of staff	Position
Mr Nelson	Head of 6 th Form
Mr Windsor	Deputy Head of 6 th Form
Mr Derbyshire	Head of Department and 6 th form tutor ('Top' form group, A levels)
Mr Riley	6 th form tutor ('Second Tier' form group, A levels)
Mr Wakefield	6 th form tutor (A levels and Applied A levels)
Mr Douglas	6 th form tutor (BTECs & Applied A levels)
Morgan	Data Manager
Helen	Non-teaching sixth form assistant responsible for BTEC students and apprenticeships

St John's

At the time of my research, St John's assistant head, Mr Reid, oversaw the delivery of support for HE choosing, with particular responsibility for Oxbridge students. Both Mr Reid and Head of Sixth Form, Mrs Jay, agreed to be interviewed. I also interviewed Oxbridge tutor Mr Brothers, the school's part-time careers adviser, a member of staff who organised the bi-annual HE and Careers Fair and Mrs Jay's administrative and pastoral assistant, Miss Harrison. Four sixth form tutors and the Head of Social Sciences were also selected for interview. The following St John's staff took part in my research:

Table 6

St John's staff participants	
Member of staff	Position
Mr Reid	Assistant Head, Head of KS4 and KS5
Mrs Jay	Head of 6 th Form
Mr Brothers	Oxbridge tutor
Miss Shaw	Head of Social Sciences
Mrs Barker	6 th form tutor
Mrs Beard	6 th form tutor
Mr Boxall	6 th form tutor
Miss Greenfield	6 th form tutor
Miss Harrison	Non-teaching assistant to Head of 6 th Form
Mr Knowles	Teacher responsible for bi-annual HE and Careers evening
Mrs Hollis	Peripatetic careers adviser

Parklands

At Parklands, I interviewed the Head and Deputy Head of Sixth Form, the Head of Careers and four sixth form tutors. Unlike Hallingford and St John's, where teachers socialised in small departmental staff rooms, and where support staff socialised separately, all Parklands support and teaching staff met daily for morning coffee in a large communal staff room. It was an ideal opportunity to talk to people informally. The following St John's staff took part in my research:

Table 7

Parklands staff participants	
Member of staff	Position
Mrs Dawson	Head of 6 th Form
Dr Tremain	Deputy Head of 6 th Form
Mrs Pearson	Head of Careers
Mr Cartwright	6 th form tutor and departmental head
Dr Cox	6 th form tutor and departmental head
Mr Griffiths	6 th form tutor and departmental head
Mr Renouf	6 th form tutor and departmental head

Data collection

My primary data collection methods were semi-structured interviews and observation. The flexibility and informality of my interviews allowed rapport to be built and a deeper understanding of the social worlds of my participants. They also gave me insights into school and family situations that were ‘closed’ to me (Burgess, 2006, p.84). Interviews complemented my observations of school events, allowing the gathering of ‘live data’, by looking at what was taking place in situ rather than learning from second hand accounts (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007, p.396)

Interviewing

My position as interviewer

Many factors can affect an interview, such as the extent of mutual trust, social distance and the interviewer’s control over the interview (Cohen et al, 2007, p.350). While most teachers and nearly all students preferred a more informal approach, some senior teachers and high attaining students adopted a formal tone. Adopting a similarly formal tone myself could be useful to hide my discomfort when asking difficult questions. Conversely, the conversational nature of my semi-structured

interviews meant opinions were sometimes expressed which shocked me and I had to disguise my surprise or disquiet (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, p.72). For example, when a high attaining student described her frustrations over students she believed were not 'bright enough' being allowed to join the school's Oxbridge Group, or a teacher laughing when I referred to students applying to 'new' universities. Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) point out that we cannot bias our fieldwork by talking only with those we find most 'congenial or politically sympathetic' (p.72). In addition, participants' opinions offered insights into the culture of my schools. It was important that students felt safe 'to discuss their interpretations of the world in which they live(d), and to express situations from their own point of view' (Cohen et al, 2007, p.349).

Interviewing students

Cohen et al (2007) remind us that interviewers have to be sensitive to their own effect on an interview (p.365). There are aspects of my identity that no amount of disguising through dress and other aspects of my presentation will hide. I wanted to appear professional but not threatening, but I was sensitive that my presentation as a middle class, older, white woman would shape how I was perceived (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, p.73). It was possible, for example, that students' first instinct would be to respond to me as they would as a teacher. For some students, this meant that I was deemed trustworthy; for others, any resemblance to a teacher would work in exactly the opposite way (Cohen et al, 2007, p.40; see also Hey, 2002). Hey (2002) acknowledges the power imbalance between her and the schoolgirls she was researching. As a white woman 'with a middle-class education' she explains it was difficult to avoid 'non-exploitative field relations' (Hey, 2002, p.75). In a similar way, I was conscious of a power imbalance and my desire to 'appropriate parts of [my students'] lives' (Hey, 2002, p.75). Many others have discussed the slippery area of mistaking rapport and reciprocity for friendship when researching and interviewing (for example, Burgess, 1991; Cohen et al, 2007; Finch 1984; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Nonetheless, I did encourage the use of my first name and gave my contact details. Where it seemed appropriate, I shared confidences about my own chequered educational and HE history. As Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) state, it is hard to expect 'honesty' and 'frankness' from participants if an interviewer is not prepared to be honest about herself (p.72).

Interviews had to be arranged at the convenience of the school. Nonetheless, I was able to conduct three rounds of interviews in each of my schools with the majority of my student research participants. Interviews were conducted at what I considered to be key points in a student's sixth form: in the autumn and summer term of year 12, and after students had submitted their UCAS applications, in year 13. Third interviews with one Hallingford and one St John's non-conformer who left school at the end of year 12, and three Parklands' students who completed their sixth form at sixth form college, were all held away from their original schools. One Hallingford high attainer and four Parklands high attainers were interviewed once. Two St John's non-conformers who completed sixth form, were interviewed for a fourth time once they had left school.

My first interview with year 12 students were shaped by open questions designed to elicit information about their experiences as moderate or high attainers and early thoughts about their post-school aspirations. However, I opened with some closed questions designed to gather information about their GCSE attainment and socio-economic background.²⁸ As Cohen et al (2007) advise for web-based questionnaires, starting with straight forward questions helps to put participants at ease, making them more likely to feel positively about participation (p.227). I then asked some open questions designed to find out how students felt about their academic attainment, their subject choices and their general experiences of school. Questions were framed to encourage students to talk freely. For example, I used 'Tell me a bit about your subjects and how you chose them', rather than 'What subjects are you taking and why did you choose them?' As Becker (1998) explains 'Why?' questions have a tendency to provoke defensiveness (p.58). Having asked students to talk about their subject choices, it was relatively easy to steer my questioning towards whether they wanted to go to university or an alternative post-school destination, and who they spoke to about such decisions.

My second interviews with year 12 students were timed to fall near the end of the summer term. Where possible, I conducted them at around the time of each school's UCAS day and/or school HE events. Questioning during this second interview was

²⁸ See Appendix G for aide memoires with examples of typical questions used when interviewing students.

designed to find out how useful students found the support offered for their post-choosing school during these events. Most were more interested to talk about their first year as a sixth former.

In year 13, I timed interviews for when the school and/or official UCAS deadline for submission of applications had passed. By year 13, most students were at ease in interview and had a lot they wanted to talk about. Usually, I only had to ask one or two questions about their UCAS applications or their search for an alternative to HE, for students to talk freely.

Interviewing teachers

As a former teacher, rapport was established fairly quickly with most teachers I interviewed (Walford, 2012, p. 115). Most teachers were interested in my research and semi-structured interviews worked well for the conversational nature of our interviews. Cohen et al (2007) describe the need to communicate ‘very clearly and positively the purpose, likely duration, nature and conduct and contents of the interview’ (p.362). Teachers short of time appreciated having the terms of the interview set out formally and efficiently. I developed a way of relating to different teachers through a quick initial assessment of visual and verbal clues (McDowell, 1998, p.2138). For example, standing up to greet me or hastily tidying a classroom as I entered the room, were both ‘good’ signs that teachers would be willing and good-humoured interviewees. Teachers who stressed how much time they could ‘give’ me just as we were beginning were generally less forthcoming.

I opened interviews with senior teachers with some closed questions about the size of sixth form, figures for numbers who progressed to university, and of these how many progressed to Russell Group and Oxbridge.²⁹ I also asked when A level subject choices were made and about the support given for subject choosing. I used open questions to ask about the delivery of support for students’ HE choosing, and specifically about support given to Oxbridge applicants. Ostrander (1993) says ‘elites’ have a tendency to ‘just talk’ because they are used to others listening to what they have to say (p.22). Hallingford’s Head of Sixth Form, Mr Nelson, and St John’s Assistant Head, Mr Reid, took great pride in the support their schools gave

²⁹ See Appendix G for aide memoires with examples of typical questions used when interviewing staff.

Oxbridge applicants and talked at length about Oxbridge preparation. When they had finished, I asked about the level of support for other university applicants. It was notable that in both cases the men instantly turned off the charm at this point (see Chapter 6). To get the interviews back on track, I acted as if oblivious to the change of mood and steered questioning towards an area of provision with which I knew them to be especially proud.³⁰ I did not enjoy using such ploys, but I wanted to smooth relations for my research. I believe it helped that as woman I was not taken too seriously (Gurney, 1991, p.56).

In all three schools, form tutors were integral to the system for formal support given for students' HE and non-HE choosing. Most appeared to value an exchange of views on supporting students with their post-school choosing. This was helped by the fact that I 'spoke their language' and had inside knowledge (Finch, 1984; Watts, 2006) of the UCAS process. Interviews with form tutors were used to gain information about the size of form groups and if grouped by attainment, and the use of form periods. I used open questions to ask about how they helped students with their post-school choosing. It was usually at this stage that teachers revealed an opinion about the focus of their school's HE discourse. For example, some form tutors expressed concern that students felt 'pushed' towards university. At Parklands, two form tutors questioned the extent of the formal support the school provided for boys' UCAS applications.

Interviewing admission tutors and other HE/FE representatives

Originally, I had not planned to interview HE personnel. However, as part of my fieldwork, I observed careers fairs at both Hallingford and Parklands, and a joint HE and careers fair held at St John's. I also observed two year 12 UCAS preparation days at each of my three schools. These events meant I had the opportunity to interview admissions tutors, other members of HE admissions teams (admissions administrators) and student ambassadors. All interviews with HE personnel were short and informal, with most stressing the non-academic attractions of their institutions. In addition, I also conducted a short telephone interview with the Director of Admissions at King's College London (KCL) and spoke to the Director

³⁰ For Mr Nelson, this was his creation of a 'Supper Society' for Oxbridge applicants. Mr Reid took pride in St John's sixth form website.

of Admissions for the Cambridge Colleges about their use of the personal statement. One FE representative responsible for apprenticeships allowed me to record a short, informal interview with her in which we discussed the ‘stigma’ of going to college and the reluctance of schools to allow FE colleges to present alternatives to HE.

An ethnographic researcher is never ‘off duty’. In addition to informal interviews with HE personnel, I also had many other conversations with students and staff who were not among my research participants. In addition, I had conversations with students and their parents attending St John’s sixth form opening evening and HE and Careers Fair, and Parklands’ HE Fair. Fieldnotes made of my encounters produced valuable data which helped to inform my understanding of the culture of my schools, as well as what mattered to students and their families when HE choosing (see Pugsley, 1998).

Transcribing and analysis of interviews

Transcribing my many interviews was expensive and time consuming (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, p.149). Interviews with key students and staff were transcribed verbatim by myself. I listened to all other interviews and chose only those which offered new insights or useful comparisons for verbatim transcription by an external transcriber; others, I paraphrased. Where I relied on an external transcriber, I checked what had been written against my recording.

*Initial coding*³¹

Coding is ‘nothing more than assigning some sort of shorthand designation’ to data to make it easier to retrieve specific parts (Merriam, 2009, p.173). Initial coding of my transcripts entailed a simple process of colour-coding and underlining of any phrases I thought significant; for example, anything repeated or ‘quotable’. As well as highlighting anything which seemed to directly address my research questions, I noted down observations, questions and possible interpretations as I transcribed (Mason, 2002, p.77). In this way, my transcriptions were not an entirely ‘objective record’ (Mason, 2002, p.77). Cohen et al (2007) warn of the limitations of transcriptions and advise that ‘different kinds of data are recorded in the transcript’

³¹ See Appendix H for examples of some of my descriptive and analytic codes and an example of a transcript with open coding.

such as tone, interruptions, speed of speech and emphases (p.367). I made notes of anything I recalled about the interview or which I found by cross-referencing with my field diary. For example, a student becoming tearful or a teacher's apparent suppressed anger. Transcriptions need to indicate 'the trivial, but often crucial, pauses and overlaps' (Cresswell, 2007, p.209). The timing of a pause or long-held silence were such 'crucial' moments.

Critical and creative engagement with the 'text'

Cohen et al (2007) describe the process of analysis as one which is 'almost inevitably interpretive' and a process which is a 'reflexive, reactive interaction between the researcher and the decontextualized data' (p.469). I was conscious of needing to strike a balance between my reaction to the data, how it addressed my research questions, and the theoretical concepts underpinning my research. As Merriam explains:

Data analysis is a complex process that involves moving back and forth between concrete bits of data and abstract concepts, between inductive and deductive reasoning, between description and interpretation.

(Merriam 2009, p.176)

Sometimes, the data took me back to the literature, and a re-reading produced sensitising concepts which suggested directions where I might look (Blumer, 1954, p.7) or interpretive devices (Bowen, 2006) with which I could start to analyse. For example, I had not fully comprehended the relevance of Bourdieu's (1998) 'family spirit' or Reay's (2015) 'family project' until I came to analyse my interview with Simon, a St John's moderate attainer, who felt university was 'not for (him)' but was under pressure from his parents to apply. When I learnt that Simon had an older sister at medical school it was easier to comprehend his feelings of shame in rejecting the aspirations integral to the 'family project'. Recent reading meant I sometimes had theoretical concepts in mind at the outset of an observation or an interview, and an observation of an event might be understood in new ways. As Blumer and many others describe, an interplay occurs between theory, reading of the literature and the data before us, and in this way sensitising concepts can be tested, improved, and refined (Blumer, 1954, p.3).

Key themes and sensitising concepts

Some of the data were actively sought out because I approached transcripts with my research questions in mind, or sensitising concepts derived from my reading of the literature. Sometimes, I developed concepts from the raw data (Corbin and Strauss, 2008, p.66). For example, my concept of ‘luke warm’ knowledge emerged from interviews with students who misrecognised hearsay as ‘hot’ knowledge.

Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus and cultural and social capital were key sensitising concepts. My reading of Bourdieu (1976) on schools as vehicles of social reproduction proved particularly helpful in the case of Parklands. Fieldnotes taken whilst observing Parklands’ HE and Careers Evenings, and interviews with students and teachers, revealed the extent to which all boys’ UCAS applications benefited from the school’s institutional habitus (Reay et al, 2005) and the school’s access to enhanced cultural and social capital possessed by teachers (Oliver and Kettley, 2010). With Parklands’ teachers in mind, comments made by Hallingford and St John’s students about support for their HE choosing prompted me to re-visit Oliver and Kettley’s (2010) concept of teacher habitus. With ‘teacher habitus’ as a sensitising concept, I found I could apply Oliver and Kettley’s concepts of ‘facilitator’ and ‘gatekeeper’ more broadly. On returning to my transcripts, I saw clearly indications of different teachers’ political and ethical dispositions (Oliver and Kettley, 2010, p.737) and how some could be categorised as facilitators for moderate attainers HE and non-HE choices, and some as gatekeepers.

My reading of David et al (2003) and Reay et al (2005) suggested ‘familial habitus’ as a sensitising concept. The diversity of student types in my study meant it was not always the case that an affluent, middle-class familial habitus automatically conferred the advantages of university educated parents (Reay et al, 2005, p. 62). Equally, a working class familial habitus sometimes included a parent educated at a ‘new’ or non-UK university. Cross-referencing transcripts alerted me to the complexity of students’ familial habituses, and in the level of support given by graduate parents of older and newer universities. In addition, some of my students’ family backgrounds included an older graduate sibling who offered practical and emotional support for students’ HE and non-HE choosing. Finally, some working-class students came from families whose social networks produced ‘hot’ knowledge

of apprenticeships or college choices. The variety of family types suggested new ways in which the influence of familial habitus on students' HE and non-HE choosing could be analysed.

During the process of analysis, I also developed a typology of students' responses to their experiences of their schools' HE discourses. Some of my categories (see Table 9), such as 'non-conformer' emerged during early analysis of my transcripts. Others, such as 'critical conformer' and 'non-conformer who passed' emerged later on in my research and only once I understood all my students in relation to each other. My typology served as a heuristic device which helped me to think through students' experiences of the support they received for their post-school choosing and how this shaped their responses to the HE discourses of their schools. It also helped me to make comparisons between my schools.

Table 9

Typology of students' responses to schools' HE discourses	
Student Type	Description
Conformer	Applies to HE. Unquestioning of the HE discourse and uncomplaining about level of support.
Critical Conformer	Applies to HE. Questions and has insight into HE discourse and differentiated levels of support.
Aggrieved Conformer	Applies to HE. Questions the HE discourse but without insight. Complains about differentiated levels of support.
Independent Chooser	Resourceful HE chooser. Researches options without school/parental assistance.
Non-Conformer (who 'passes' as HE applicant)	Chooses an alternative to HE. Completes a UCAS application or claims to be taking a gap year, as if intending to progress to university.
Non-Conformer Year 12 Leaver	Does not aspire to HE. Leaves at end of year 12 to pursue an apprenticeship or to go to college.
Rebel Non-Conformer	Does not aspire to HE. Does not pass as an HE applicant. Challenges pressure to apply to HE. Chooses an alternative to HE.

Observation

One of the many advantages of an ethnographic study is that I was able to mix my methods and could be creative with my approach. In addition to the data obtained through interviews and conversations, I observed UCAS days, HE Fairs, sixth form assemblies, lessons and form periods. These helped to inform my understanding of the ethos and academic culture of my three sixth forms. Lessons I observed were chosen specifically so that I could observe some of my moderately attaining research participants in class. I observed school UCAS days and HE fairs in order to compare types of formal advice and guidance for students' HE choosing in all three schools. Only St John's provided advice and guidance for alternatives during formal HE events. I learnt of a talk given by the Head of Sixth Form to parents of prospective sixth formers and an apprenticeship fair held at Hallingford after they had taken place.

The following table (see over) gives a summary of data collected through formal observation and participant observations, with an indication of the amount of time spent on each. A table of informal observational data (the social, cultural and environmental aspects of my schools) is provided in Appendix I.

Table 10

Observational data (formal)					
Method	Sources of data collection	Hallingford	St John's	Parklands	Total
Observation	HE and/or careers fairs	1	1	2	4
	UCAS days	2	2	2	6
	Apprentice-ship Assembly /Fair	Not observed	1	0	1
	Sixth form open evening/ New parents evening	Not observed	1	0	1
	Assemblies	2	2	2	6
	Form periods	2	2	2	6
	Lessons observation	2 (English & Physics)	2 (Sociology & Psychology)	2 (English Lit & Lang.)	6
	Oxbridge preparation	Not observed	2	2	4
Participant observation	UCAS presentations given	0	3	0	3
	Delivery of Sociology lesson	0	1	0	1
				Total	38

I used a field diary extensively while researching in my three schools, both to record as objectively as possible what I saw, and as a place where I could describe events more subjectively. On some occasions, such as observing a lesson or presentation, it was acceptable for me to be seen taking notes. However, there were times, such as during a conversation, when note taking would have been disruptive (Fielding, 2008, p.274). On these occasions, I made some hurried jottings which I fleshed out as soon as possible afterwards. Quotations I believed especially useful were spoken into my

recorder while recall was still fresh (Fielding, 2008, p.274). Two of my schools entailed long commutes on public transport and I used this time to go over my fieldnotes, adding observations and questions prompted by reflection on the day's events.

Fieldnotes were typed up in the evening while a day in school was still fresh in my mind, and involved an active process of interpretation and sense-making of anything that appeared 'significant' (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw, 1995, p.8). Themes often emerged during the process of re-reading my diary and typing up my notes which were had not been evident while in the field (Fielding, 2008, p.274). For example, notes made of a lesson observation of a teacher's encouraging questioning of two moderately attaining girls prompted me to cross reference with other lesson observations. My analysis suggested some teachers had a habitus which motivated them to support moderate attainers as part of their teaching. Other teachers appeared motivated to encourage high attainers and ignored moderate attainers in class.

Sometimes, impressions of key events noted in my diary helped to inform my questioning of students, and the contrast between students' observations and my own brought important insights. A presentation given by a university admissions tutor, about which I had written copious notes, had intimidated many St John's moderate attainers. Cross-referencing my notes with transcripts made me reflect on the difference between my own response as a researcher familiar with the HE field and a year 12 student unfamiliar with the HE process. Fielding (2008) warns that writing up fieldnotes often takes as long as my observations (p. 274). The detailed notes I made of UCAS day presentations, and many other observations, meant that my observations were brought back to me in vivid detail.³² This was especially helpful when I needed to recall an event during the processes of analysis and writing up.

Analysis of documents

Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) note that documents can provide important information about the settings being studied and their wider context (p.122). My study of public documents included the contents of sixth form noticeboards, school prospectuses and websites, and policies and literature produced by my schools as

³² See Appendix J for a field note made about the challenges of dealing with St John's Deputy Head of Sixth Form, Mr Collins.

part of the formal provision of support for students' post-school choosing. As Bryman (2001) explains, people who produce documents usually have a particular point of view they want to communicate (p.376). Prospectuses and websites were a good source of information about how my schools wished to present themselves to prospective students and their parents. Internal notice boards and displays also served as reminders of the dominant aims and values that the schools wanted to communicate to students, teachers and visitors (e.g. parents, governors, inspectors). Such documents presented an 'official' view of the school which could be compared with data captured through interviews and observations. For example, knowledge of the dominant HE discourses gained through interviews with students and teachers was sometimes at odds with the 'official' messages in a range of different school documents. The dominance of HE discourses was also found in the absence of 'messages' promoting non-HE choices. These messages remained remarkably durable throughout my time in the field. In addition to continuity, noticeboards also served as particularly useful indicators of new and short-lived initiatives. When analysing all school documents, my main interest was in what they could tell me about the dominant values of my schools. The following table lists the range of documents analysed:³³

³³ For a more detailed table, see Appendix K.

Table 12

School Documents			
	Hallingford	St John's	Parklands
Sixth Form noticeboards	Photos, A level grades and Russell Group/Oxbridge destinations of former students.	Displays advertising charitable work in Africa, and local community work. Teenage advice lines. Selected Christian proverbs.	Flyers for external speakers, student-led clubs and societies; news stories; HE news and university leagues tables.
Advice, information and guidance literature (HE and non-HE choosing)	A4 foolscap folder with timetable of talks and workshops. Notepaper & biro (provided to students on UCAS day).	Attainment and Aspirations booklet for 'Life Skills' form periods.	112-page HE 'bible', containing school policy on provision of HE advice, and information on HE choosing and making a UCAS application.
Prospectuses	Downloadable from website. 'Year 7 Welcome' stresses expectation of progression to university. Promotion of GCSE results.	Glossy 6 th form brochure. photos of multi-ethnic students engaged in social and academic activities; Christian motto on every page.	School welcome pack containing glossy school prospectus, supplementary brochures and DVD with Headteacher's welcome. Emphasis on cultural and academic activities.
Websites (Front and key pages)	'Easy to read' format: use of coloured text boxes, photos of multi-ethnic pupil population & school trips; GCSE statistics.	Photos of multi-ethnic pupils engaged in academic and cultural life of the school. Christian school motto.	Photos of historic main building and gardens; multi-ethnic pupils engaged in academic, sporting and cultural life of school.

Ethical considerations

Ethics inform and run continuously through every aspect of the research process. In this section I explain the code of ethics by which I conducted my research and highlight some key ethical considerations. BERA (2011) states that ‘all educational research should be conducted within an ethic of respect for: the person, knowledge, democratic values, the quality of educational research, and academic freedom’ (p.4). My dealings with teachers and students from three very different schools meant I encountered a diverse cross section of people. I had to be sensitive to a variety of values, beliefs and cultures when interviewing. At all times, and as much as it was within my power, I ensured that I treated all my participants fairly and sensitively, and with dignity, irrespective of race, gender, sexuality class, nationality, cultural identity and/or political belief (BERA, 2011, p.5).

My research was carried out with Ethical Approval from King’s College London (specifically, the Social Sciences, Humanities and Law Research Ethics Subcommittee: Education and Management Research Ethics Panel, REC Reference Number: REP/13/14-77 - see Appendix L). As well as adhering to the guidelines set out in the King’s College London Guidelines on Good Practice in Academic Research, I also conducted my research according to the BERA (2011) Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research. A sheet giving an explanation of my research was given to every research participant. This sheet also gave a guarantee of confidentiality and anonymity for all participants (see Appendix M).

Informed consent

The essence of the principle of informed consent is that the human subjects of research should be allowed to agree or refuse to participate in the light of comprehensive information concerning the nature and purpose of the research.

(Homan, 1991, p.69)

In my first interview with students, and interviews with teachers, I explained as comprehensively as possible, the process in which participants would be engaged, including why I wanted them to participate, how I intended to use their participation, and how and to whom I would be reporting the findings of my study (BERA, 2011,

p.4). BERA (2011) states that voluntary informed consent is the ‘condition in which participants understand and agree to their participation without any duress, prior to the research getting underway’ (p.5). Participants were told that they had a right to withdraw from the research process at any point. I asked all student and teacher participants for their verbal and signed consent to be interviewed and for me to record our interviews (see Appendix M). I explained that recordings would be heard only by me and stored in a secure place to which only I had access. All my participants agreed to their interviews being recorded. There were two occasions where I was asked to turn off the recorder during the course of an interview owing to the confidential nature of the information given. I have not used that information. I made sure that at the beginning and end of each interview there was an opportunity for participants to ask questions or to raise any concerns about anything to do with the interview, or any part of my research. When talking informally, for example to HE personnel or to teachers who were not formally interviewed, I always ensured that my position as a doctoral student researching types of support for students’ post-school choosing was understood, and asked permission to quote them. Each of my schools has also been told that they are entitled to receive a summary of my findings.

Homan (1991) explains confidentiality in relation to participants’ identities as:

the contract between researcher and subjects in which the researcher agrees [...] to report the enquiry [so] that the identities of participants will not be disclosed.

(Homan, 1991, p.140)

I explained to all participants that when I wrote up my findings, all names, including their own, the name of their schools, and any names used in interview, would be changed. The only exception were two senior university admission tutors who were happy for me to use their names and positions. Participants were informed that I would be transcribing as many of my interviews as possible but that, where I used external transcribers, they would be told of the confidential nature of my work.

In the UK a variety of ethical guidelines make it clear that in the case of children under 16 years of age, parental or guardian consent must be sought for their participation in research. Children over the age of 16 years are deemed capable of

volunteering without the need for parental or guardian consent.³⁴ All my student participants were over 16 years of age. However, I was careful that all who took part fully understood my research and checked at the beginning of each interview that they were happy to continue to be involved. As Iphofen (2011) explains, consenting is not ‘a once-and-for-all act’, it is an ongoing ‘process’ (p.67). Where appropriate during an interview, I reminded students of their right not to answer a question or offer an observation.

Informed consent is more problematic with participant observation since things may be seen or overheard and their relevance only discovered later. On some occasions, I was in a public situation where fully informed consent was not possible (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, p.42). In such cases, I confined what I learnt to the privacy of my fieldnotes, for use as background information only. On some occasions, I was able to explain my position as a doctoral researcher and ask if I might quote someone anonymously. Alternatively, I asked for an interview at a later date. Wearing a visitor’s badge helped to remind people I was an outsider but not always that I was researching. During the course of my research, I emailed four university admissions tutors to seek their permission to quote something they had told me personally or said when addressing a school audience. Just as with Khan (2011), there were also times when an email sent to ‘fact-check’ (p.202) resulted in me being asked not to include something, and I respected these requests.

There were also ‘grey’ areas where my position as researcher slipped into the background. I had the kind of friendly working relations with some of the female administrative staff at Hallingford which I had enjoyed in other work places. As an older woman, I believe some found it easier to discuss their personal and working lives than if, for example, I had been a younger woman or male. Some spoke to me as mothers of working class moderate attainers, both at Hallingford and other local schools. I recognise Finch’s (1984) moral dilemmas (p.80) over data collected through such conversations, especially for the sons and daughters I never met, and did not use anything these women told me in confidence. In this way, I hope that

³⁴ I followed the National Children’s Bureau guidelines for researching young people (Shaw et al, 2011) and King’s College, London’s College Research Ethics Committee (CREC) Guidance Document (2016/17).

even if they were to read this and recognise themselves, they will not feel any sense of betrayal (see Finch, 1984, p.85).

Conclusion

Willis (2005) describes the importance to ethnography of a 'reflexive methodology' which goes beyond simple data-gathering (p.82). As reflexive ethnographers, Willis and Trondman (2000) asks researchers to be 'open and plastic [...//] capable of unfolding and developing themselves in dialectical relation to ethnographic data' (p.13). My ethnographic methods were designed to have as broad a relationship with my schools as possible. It was essential that I became engaged in the world of my schools if I was to understand their practices and processes as well as people's experiences of them. Observations, the use of semi-structured interviews, my every day encounters, and the constant 'toing and froing' between active engagement with the field, thinking theoretically, and then writing about what I heard and saw, were all part of my work as an ethnographic researcher. Equally important was the work carried out when outside of the field: the coding of transcripts, cross checking with fieldnotes and occasionally needing to cross reference with school prospectuses and websites. My methods for data gathering, the different types of data I collected, and my analysis were all chosen to provide 'maximum illumination' (Willis and Trondman, 2000, p.12) of selective practices in my school sixth forms and how these impacted on students' experiences of post-school choosing.

Working in the field was guided by Willis and Trondman's (2000) theoretically informed ethnography (TIME). There were times when I was aware that I was observing my schools through the lens of Bordieusian thinking. At other times, I worked hard to put aside my theoretical concepts such as institutional and teacher habitus, and attempted to make objective observations by asking, 'What is going on here?', rather than 'Why is this happening?'. However, the more I have reflected on how I went about my work, the more aware I became that starting any observation of a school with a *tabula rasa* was an impossibility – my former experiences as a teacher, as well as my experiences as student and researcher, meant nothing I encountered could be seen uncritically. Willis and Trondman remind us that a theoretically informed method for research is not limited to what we do in the field and how we think about it. It also serves as a method and catalyst (Willis and Trondman, 2000,

p.14). On occasions, I was able to use my theoretical lens to create the necessary distance from practices familiar to me. For example, by seeing teachers in relation to their teacher habitus. By comparing teacher habitus within and across schools, teachers could be recast in a new light, and I was able to make ‘sensitive comparisons’ between their social worlds (Grimshaw, Hobson and Willis, 2005, p.65). Similarly, in the two schools most familiar to me, it was especially important to check and re-check observations recorded in my fieldnotes for any ‘taken for granted’ assumptions I might have made. It could be discomfoting to re-visit my early fieldnotes; looking at them through a theoretical lens sometimes revealed things about myself and assumptions I had been quick to make. However, re-visiting certain incidents also helped to recapture the surprise when first encountered, and which later became normalised and forgotten.

Finally, the flexibility of an ethnographic study meant I was able to choose methods which felt natural to the way I work, and which were most helpful for researching and presenting the ‘nitty gritty’ (Willis and Trondman, 2000) of school life. As Willis (2005) argues, my choice of methods and techniques were shaped by my theoretical interests and encounters, and the ‘comparative forays’ I might make between my three schools (p.82). I chose my methods with some key theoretical concepts in mind. A range of formal and informal observations informed my understanding of the institutional habitus of each of my schools, and pointed to the dominance of certain discourses related to attainment and transition. Interviews with students and teachers brought another perspective to my own observations.

Interviewing students also helped me to form an understanding of their familial habituses. My key theoretical concepts guided my methods, but data collected suggested the need for further conceptual development and new areas for data collection. When I originally designed my research, I had not foreseen the usefulness of Oliver and Kettley’s concept of teacher habitus; nor had I seen the value in interviewing, albeit informally, FE representatives, to obtain another viewpoint on the dominant discourses of school sixth forms generally. As Willis (2005), amongst others, points out, forms of data collection and analytic procedures are interconnected. Having a theoretical lens to ‘look through’ also prompts the researcher to develop her own techniques and inventions (Willis, 2005, p.82). In this way, I adapted my methods as my research and my analysis of data developed. By

my final year, it was not possible to observe or interview without automatically recognising connections with the theoretical concepts which underpinned my research design and those that emerged as a result of my work in the field.

INTRODUCING THE STUDENT PARTICIPANTS

By way of introducing the many students whose experiences are described in the chapters which follow this short section, the tables presented below give details of all the students interviewed for my research. In Tables 18, 19 and 20, I present details for Hallingford, St John's and Parklands' HE applicants, their socio-economic background (parental occupation and, where applicable, university attended) and the key adviser/influence for their university choices. I also give an indication of the student's position on the HE discourse of their school, the A levels students attained and the university accessed. Where relevant, I include an outline of the choice history (for example, where the university accessed was not the student's first choice). Tables 21 and 22 give similar details for all Hallingford and St John's 'non-conformers' i.e. students who did not conform to the HE discourses of their schools and chose an alternative to university.

Table 14

Hallingford HE applicants and their final destinations							
Student³⁵	Parent(s) at home/ Guardian (university if attended)	Key earner and occupation	Key adviser /influence for post-school choice	Response to HE discourse³⁶	Subjects studied	Final destination	Choice History
Adela (high mod)	Mother/ Grandmother	Cashier in bank (mother)	Mother/ Mr Riley (Clearing advice – NMB)	Aggrieved conformer	Psychology (B) English (C) Biology (E)	Psychology at Essex	Clearing (Did not attain ABB for Psychology at Aston)
Asmit (high)	Mother	Mental health nurse (mother)	Sutton Trust/ Mr Nelson (Clearing advice – Sister)	Critical conformer	Economics (B) History (B) Spanish (B)	Classics and Politics at Glasgow	Clearing (did not attain AAA for Law at LSE)
Bival (high)	Parents	Taxi driver (father)	Sutton Trust	Conformer	Computer Sciences (A*) Maths (A*) Physics (A)	Harvard (Major unknown)	1st choice

³⁵ Moderate attainer (mod); higher end moderate attainer (high mod); high attainer (high).

³⁶ See Table 9 for an explanation of students' responses to the HE discourses of their schools.

Hallingford HE applicants and their final destinations (continued)							
Student	Parent(s) at home/ Guardian (university if attended)	Key earner and occupation	Key adviser /influence for post- school choice	Response to HE discourse	Subjects studied	Final destination	Choice History
Fahima (high)	Mother	Mother in unpaid work; older brothers support family.	Sutton Trust/ Mr Nelson	Critical conformer	History (A) Economics (A) Spanish (A)	History at LSE	1 st choice (After unsuccessful Oxbridge application)
Karim (mod)	Parents (non-UK university- father)	Parents run family business (shop)	Mr Nelson/ Business Studies teacher	Conformer	Business BTEC Distinction* Distinction* Distinction*	Law at Westminster	1 st choice
Kirti (high)	Parents	Unknown	Sutton Trust/ Biology teacher	Critical conformer	Unknown	Biology at UCL	1 st choice (After unsuccessful Oxbridge application)
Mahnoor (mod)	Parents	Electrician (father)	Independent (online) research / Mr Austen	Critical conformer	Maths (A) Further Maths (B) Physics (D)	Engineering (Foundation) at Brunel	Clearing (Did not attain BBB for Aviation Engineering & Pilot Studies at Brunel)

Hallingford HE applicants and their final destinations (continued)							
Student	Parent(s) at home/ Guardian (university if attended)	Key earner and occupation	Key adviser /influence for post- school choice	Response to HE discourse	Subjects studied	Final destination	Choice History
Naz (high mod)	Parents	Parents run family business (shop)	Mr Austen/ Independent research (Clearing advice – NMB)	Aggrieved conformer	Maths (A) Chemistry (C) Physics (C)	Physics with astronomy at Queen Mary's	Clearing (Did not attain ABB for Physics at Surrey)
Neena (mod)	Parents	Sales assistant in kitchen & bathroom shop (father)	Sister (Russell Group graduate)	Conformer	Chemistry, (C) Maths (D) Biology (D)	Chemistry at Nottingham Trent	Clearing (Did not attain ABB for Chemistry at Cardiff)
Shafia (high mod)	Father (non-UK university - father)	Journalist (retired)	Sister (Russell Group graduate)	Conformer	Biology (B) Chemistry (B) Physics (B)	Pharmacy at King's	1 st Choice

Hallingford HE applicants and their final destinations (continued)							
Student	Parent(s) at home/ Guardian (university if attended)	Key earner and occupation	Key adviser /influence for post-school choice	Response to HE discourse	Subjects studied	Final destination	Choice History
Sumeer (high)	Mother (Buckingham as mature student)	District nurse	Mr Nelson/ Miss Williams/ Sutton Trust	Critical conformer	Politics (A) Spanish (A) History (B)	Politics at Warwick	Insurance (Unsuccessful Oxbridge applicant; did not attain AAA for Politics at LSE)
Tim (high mod)	Older sister/ Grandmother	Teaching assistant (mother does not live at home)	Mr Nelson (Clearing advice – NMB)	Conformer	Maths (B) Physics (C) Computer Science (C)	Computer Science at Royal Holloway	Clearing (Did not attain AAB for Computer Sciences at King's)
Tony (high)	Parents	Parents own a take-away	Mr Austen/ Independent research	Conformer	Maths (A*) Physics (A*) History (B)	Physics at Warwick	1 st choice (after unsuccessful Oxbridge application)
Zane (mod)	Mother/ Grandmother	Assistant in accounts, local council (mother)	Friends	Independent chooser	Media Studies (B) Music Tech (E) Drama Studies BTEC (Distinction* Distinction)	Sonic Arts at Brunel	1 st Choice

Table 15

St John's HE applicants and their final destinations							
Student	Parent(s) at home/ Guardian (university if attended)	Key earner and occupation	Key adviser /influence for HE choice	Response to HE discourse	Subjects studied	Final destination	Choice History
Alice (high)	Parents	Senior police officer, Metropolitan Police (father); events manager (mother)	Independent (online) research	Critical conformer	Biology (A) Chemistry (A) Maths (A)	Biology at Bristol	1st Choice (applied after gap year)
Amy (mod)	Parents	Self-employed book-keeper (father)	Independent (online) research/ friends	Aggrieved conformer	RE (B) History (C) English (D)	History at Essex	1 st Choice ³⁷
Benny (mod)	Parents (LSE - father)	School teacher of Economics (father)	Father	Aggrieved conformer	Music Tech (B) Music (D) Physics (E)	Mechatronics at Middlesex	1 st Choice

³⁷ Amy's offer was BBC. She was surprised and delighted to be accepted by Essex. She texted to say she believed a B in her EPQ was taken into consideration. (EPQ – Extended Project Qualification - see Appendix B).

³⁷

St John's HE applicants and their final destinations (continued)							
Student	Parent(s) at home/ Guardian (university if attended)	Key earner and occupation	Key adviser /influence for HE choice	Response to HE discourse	Subjects studied	Final destination	Choice History
Bridget (high)	Parents	Gardener (father)	Independent (online) research / Biology teacher	Conformer	Biology (A*) Maths (A) Chemistry (A)	Biology at Exeter	1 st Choice
Ella (high mod)	Parents (Bath Spa - mother)	School teacher of BTEC in Childcare (Mother)	Mother/ Geography teacher	Aggrieved conformer	Geography (A) Music (C) Economics (C)	Geography at Leicester	1 st Choice (Offer was ABB. Ella's grade 8 saxophone taken into consideration)
Judith (high)	Parents (St Andrew's - father)	Father works in IT; mother works in school library	Father/ independent (online) research	Conformer	Psychology (A) Biology (B) Maths (C)	Biological Sciences at Warwick	1 st Choice
Katie (high)	Parents (father - Cambridge; mother - Oxford)	Vicar (father)	Mother/Mr Brothers	Conformer	Maths (A*) Further Maths (A) Physics (A)	Maths and Physics at UCL	1 st choice (after unsuccessful Oxbridge application)

St John's HE applicants and their final destinations (continued)							
Student	Parent(s) at home/ Guardian (university if attended)	Key earner and occupation	Key adviser /influence for HE choice	Response to HE discourse	Subjects studied	Final destination	Choice History
Kayode (high)	Parents (Both parents went to university in Nigeria)	Assistant in high street bank (mother)	Independent research (online and HE visits)/ Physics teacher	Conformer	Maths (A) Physics (A) Chemistry (A)	Mechanical Engineering at Warwick	1 st Choice
Patrick (high mod)	Mother (Essex - mother)	Librarian	Independent research (online and HE visits)	Independent chooser	IT (A) Maths (B) Economics (B)	Computer Sciences at Surrey	Insurance (Did not attain AAA for Computer Sciences at Warwick)
Ruth (high)	Parents (King's College, London - mother)	Tax consultant (father); lab technician (mother)	Mother/Mr Brothers	Conformer	Chemistry (A*) Maths (A*) Further Maths (A)	Chemistry at Durham	1 st choice (after unsuccessful Oxbridge application)
Zoe (high mod)	Parents	Carpenter (father)	Independent (online) research / Older sister	Aggrieved conformer	Sociology (A) PE (B) Photography (B)	Sports Sciences at Cardiff Met	1 st Choice (applied after gap year)

Table 16

Parklands HE applicants and their final destinations							
Student	Parent(s) at home/ Guardian (university if attended)	Key earner and occupation	Key adviser / influence for post school choice	Response to HE discourse	Subjects studied	Final destination	Choice History
Ash (mod)	Parents (Non-UK University - father)	Biochemical engineer (father)	Independent research (online) /College	Aggrieved	A levels taken at 6 th form college. Politics (A*) Economics (A) Maths (B)	Economics and Politics at Leeds	1 st choice
Charlie (high mod)	Parents (Newcastle - mother)	Works in advertising (father); primary school teacher (mother)	School/ Mother	Conformer	English Lit (A) English Lang (B) Geography (B)	English Language at King's	1 st choice
Crispin (high)	Parents (parents' universities unknown)	Parents own their own finance company	School	Conformer	Chemistry (A*) Maths (A*) Further Maths (A*) Physics (A*)	Natural Sciences at Cambridge	1 st choice
Danny (mod)	Parents (Goldsmiths – father; Cambridge – mother)	Editor (father); chaplin (mother)	Facebook Group/ drumming teacher	Independent chooser	Music (A) Economics (B) History (B)	Music (jazz drumming) at Leeds College of Music	1 st choice

Parklands HE applicants and their final destinations (continued)							
Student	Parent(s) at home/ Guardian (university if attended)	Key earner and occupation	Key adviser / influence for post school choice	Response to HE discourse	Subjects studied	Final destination	Choice History
Edward (high)	Parents (Imperial – father)	Commodity analyst (father)	Independent (online) research /school	Conformer	English (A) History (A) French (A)	English at Southampton	Insurance (Did not attain A*AA for English at Exeter)
Gerald (high)	Parents (Manchester - mother)	Both parents in media recruitment	School	Conformer	Politics (A*) History (A) Theology (B)	Law at Bristol	1 st choice (after unsuccessful Oxbridge application)
Guy (high mod)	Parents	Photographer (father); charity worker (mother)	Independent (online) research	Conformer	English Lit (A*) Biology (A*) English Lang (A)	English at UCL	1 st choice (Applied to UCL after gap year)
Jacob (mod)	Parents	Chartered surveyor (father)	Older brother/ College	Aggrieved	A levels taken at 6 th form college. Psychology (B) Economics (C) Spanish (C)	Decided against university. Last contact said seeking an apprenticeship.	Did not attain BBB for International Management at Loughborough
Jolyon (high mod)	Parents (Durham - father)	Management consultant (father)	School/ Older brother	Conformer	English (A*) Maths (A) History (B)	English at Bristol	1 st choice
Nathan (high)	Mother (Manchester Polytechnic)	Solicitor (mother)	School	Conformer	History (A*) Politics (A*) Economics (A)	PPE at Oxford	1 st choice

Parklands HE applicants and their final destinations (continued)							
Student	Parent(s) at home/ Guardian (university if attended)	Key earner and occupation	Key adviser / influence for post school choice	Response to HE discourse	Subjects studied	Final destination	Choice History
Marlon (mod)	Parents (Warwick - father)	Solicitor (father); social worker (mother)	Mother/ College	Aggrieved	A levels taken at 6 th form college History (C) Politics (D) Economics (D)	PPE at Goldsmiths	Clearing (Did not attain AAB for Politics at Leeds)
Rishi (mod)	Parents (LSE – father)	Solicitor (father); local council parking adjudicator (mother)	School	Conformer	English (A) Philosophy (B) Economics (B)	English Language at Edinburgh	1 st choice
Zac (mod)	Parents	Father owns a catering company	School	Conformer	Drama (B) English (C) History (C)	Theatre at Reading	Insurance (Did not attain ABB for Theatre and Performance at Leeds)

Table 17

Hallingford non-conformers and their post-school destinations							
Student ³⁸	Key carer	Key earner and occupation	Key adviser /influence	Response to HE discourse	Subjects studied	Final destination	Choice History
Dale (mod)	Father	Refuse collector (father)	Father/Uncle	Non-conformer who 'passed'	Applied Maths and BTEC Sport (grades not given)	NEET	Unsuccessful apprenticeship applications (TFL, Virgin, BT, Council)
Hari (mod)	Father/Aunt (Aunt went to Brunel)	Driver for London Underground (father)	Aunt and uncle	Non-conformer who 'passed'	History (C) Business Studies (D) Government & Politics (D)	Apprenticeship in engineering	Did not attain ABB for Law at Brunel.
Kyle (high mod)	Parents	Warehouse manager (father)	Independent research (online)	Non-conformer year 12 leaver	AS levels in Polish (A) Media Studies (B) Psychology (D)	Apprenticeship in graphic design	Left at end of year 12

³⁸ Moderate attainer (mod); higher end moderate attainer (high mod); high attainer (high).

Hallingford non-conformers and their post-school destinations (continued)

Student	Key earner and occupation	Key adviser/ influence	Response to HE discourse	Subjects studied	Final destination	Choice History	Key carer
Ravi (mod)	Parents	Unknown	Friends	Non-conformer year 12 leaver	Applied Science, Maths (grades unknown)	Left school to study Business at local FE college.	Left at end of year 12
Stacey (mod)	Mother	Hairdresser	Mother	Rebel non-conformer	Business Applied A level (B, C) Photography (preferred not to say)	Argos offered job as team manager. Withdrew application for BA cabin crew	

Table 18

St John's non-conformers and their post-school destinations							
Student	Key carer	Key earner and occupation	Key adviser/ influence	Response to HE discourse	Subjects studied	Final destination	Choice History
Erica (mod)	Parents	Father works in IT.	Independent research /friends for Music College application; friend of mother for access to nursing course	Non-conformer year 12 leaver	AS levels: Biology, Music, Psychology, (Preferred not to give grades)	Left school to study for a diploma in Music Production at Music College. Then progressed to an access to nursing course at local college	Left at end of year 12
Memphis (mod)	Parents	Unknown	Mother	Non-conformer year 12 leaver		Apprenticeship with firm of architects	Left at end of year 12
Michael (mod)	Mother	Mother	Mother	Non-conformer year 12 leaver	unknown	Left school to study Business at local FE college	Left at end of year 12

Student	Key carer	Key earner and occupation	Key adviser/ influence	Response to HE discourse	Subjects studied	Final destination	Choice History
Simon (mod)	Parents (East Anglia - father)	Musician (father); physio therapist (mother)	Older sister	Non-conformer who 'passed'	Economics (C) Chemistry (D) Biology (E)	Apprenticeship in sales with local Nissan garage	
Vicky (mod)	Parents	Kitchen fitter (father); school administrative assistant (mother)	Mother/ Grandfather	Non-conformer who 'passed'	Maths (B) Economics (C) Psychology (C)	Apprenticeship with local firm of accountants	Did not take up offer to study Accounting and Finance at Winchester

CHAPTER 4

Formal and informal sixth form selective practices

Sometimes, [students] can't do anything else other than Sociology or Business Studies...there's no other option, because no other subject will take them.

(Miss Shaw, St John's)

Introduction

In this chapter I discuss types of formal and informal sixth form selective practices which impacted negatively on Hallingford and St John's moderately attaining sixth formers. As explained in Chapter 1, I use the term 'selective practice' to mean any type of formal or informal practice which differentiates, excludes and/or sorts students by attainment and/or post-school aspiration. Unlike lower secondary where academic selection is prohibited, there are no restrictions on selection for state sixth forms. Commonly, five GCSE passes is the minimum requirement. In addition to formal selective practices such as entry criteria for sixth form and those related to specific subject choice at A level, I examine the more subtle, informal ways in which moderate attainers are subjected to discriminatory practices. While not overtly or formally 'selective', they are, nonetheless, examples of the ways in which moderate attainers are treated and made to feel secondary to higher attaining students. Using moderate attainers' own words, I examine the 'everyday' casual celebration of higher attainers and their attainment. I also discuss some of the problems experienced with subject choices. In particular, the allocation of inexperienced teachers to 'newer' and vocational subjects popular with moderate attainers, but also students' experiences of discriminatory practice in the classroom.³⁹

As a selective fee-paying school which admitted only one student to its sixth form during the course of my research, and where moderately attaining students felt their

³⁹ Popular 'newer' (non-facilitating) and vocational subjects studied by Hallingford and St John's moderate attainers included: Business Studies, Media Studies, Psychology, Sociology, Music Technology, PE and Photography.

non-academic contributions in music and sport were highly valued by the school, Parklands does not feature largely in the first half of this chapter. However, Parklands, was found to 'weed out' students who performed poorly in their AS levels (see Weale and Fishwick, 2017). In light of recent media exposure of this practice in selective state schools, I include a short discussion about three moderate attainers who left Parklands halfway through their sixth form.

In the second half of this chapter, I describe how each of my three schools prepared year 12 students for their UCAS applications, the online system through which every student who wishes to go to university must apply. I show how formal selective practices started to emerge during Hallingford and St John's UCAS preparation days (UCAS days); in the chapters that follow, I examine the formal and informal ways in which support for HE and non-HE choosing is differentiated for different groups. I conclude this chapter with some insights from students and one form tutor about the pressures driving selective practices, the prioritising of high attaining students, and the 'push' towards university.

St John's

Entry criteria

Local league tables for GCSE and A level performance point to St John's position as the most selective of all sixth forms within its local authority area. It ranks highest out of 14 comparable schools for raw GCSE results. However, it also has one of the lowest rankings in 16-18 value added league tables. In interview, Mrs Jay explained that St John's sixth form was marketed on its 'academic identity'. In the face of stiff competition from two other high performing sixth forms in the immediate area - one a sixth form college - Mrs Jay believed St John's reputation as an 'academic' sixth form of a Church school meant that St John's had 'selling points' its competitors did not:

We're an academic Sixth Form, with good results. We're a Church school, we offer a lot of enrichment...look at all the courses we offer...and we offer opportunities for leadership - you know, prefects, house captains - which colleges don't. There's [local sixth form college] which a lot of our students want to go to, but there's no opportunities like that there.

(Mrs Jay, St John's)

Mrs Jay admitted to having mixed feelings about the speed with which she had acquired her marketing skills. While she was proud of the quality of marketing literature used to promote her sixth form, and for which she was directly responsible, she also expressed a certain degree of horror that as an educationalist she should find herself involved in such work. A popular Maths teacher and highly-respected Head of Sixth Form, Mrs Jay stressed that it was financially necessary to attract new students; she explained, 'Our numbers are our finances'. Every year, St John's lost some of its highest-attaining students to the local 'outstanding' sixth form college. Her task was to retain year 11s as well as attracting new students. Mrs Jay's marketing strategies appeared specially designed to attract high attainers. She told me she had re-branded some of the staff as 'specialist teachers' once she realised that other schools were using this label for more experienced or more highly qualified teachers.

We're all fighting for the same...you know? There's only so many kids!
(...//) So that's why we *have* to have our 'academic' identity.

(Mrs Jay, St John's)

Mrs Jay did not refer to the criteria for entry into St John's sixth form as 'selection' but explained that to maintain the 'academic identity' of her sixth form, students had to have at least five A*-Cs at GCSE, including English and Maths, and at least a B in the subjects chosen for A level. The offer of BTECs and Applied A levels was minimal, and students wishing to take A levels in Media Studies and ICT did so at another school which was part of the sixth form 'syndicate' of which St John's was a member.⁴⁰ Mrs Jay explained that all St John's form groups were 'mixed ability',

⁴⁰ St John's students could study A levels in ICT and Media Studies and Level 3 BTECs in Sport and Travel and Tourism at the other school. See Appendix B for an explanation of Level 3 qualifications.

and that the majority of St John's students aspired to HE. Further into my research I learnt that year 12 students who underperformed at AS level were not permitted to continue to year 13. This was not something Mrs Jay mentioned in interview.

However, moderate attainers, Ella, Erica and Zoe, whose extracurricular interests meant they mixed with older students, all had friends whose AS attainment meant they had not been 'allowed back' to St John's.

'It's all about class'

In a bid to attract students, St John's hosts an open day to which year 11 students from other schools are invited. It also hosts a Sixth Form Open Evening, to which year 11 students from St John's and other schools, and parents, are invited. During the course of the open day, I observed visiting year 11 students as they explored the sixth form area. I was standing in a corridor reading a noticeboard with news about St John's 'friendship' with a school in Africa when my attention was caught by two year 11 visitors. Both white working-class girls, they were identically dressed in skinny jeans and hoodies. Both wore their hair scraped tightly into 'top knots' held in place with a 'scrunchie' and sported big hoop ear-rings. When I first noticed the girls, they were standing in the door of an empty Science lab. They appeared excited; one pointed out to her friend that there were Bunsen burners on every work bench. A teacher, who happened to be passing, stopped in her tracks when she saw them. Without introduction, she asked abruptly if either of the girls were intending to do Science A levels. The girls' excitement immediately dissipated. They stood meekly before the teacher, as if being told off for a misdemeanour, and one said quietly that she wanted to do Chemistry.

Teacher (*Quickly looking the student up and down*): What's your predicted [GCSE] grade for Chemistry?

Girl (*Shyly*) Grade B...maybe a C.

Teacher (*Abruptly*): You need an A to do Chemistry here.

Girl (*Feigning lack of care*): Okay, thanks!

The teacher was about to enter a staff room when she saw me. She smiled but seemed uncomfortable that the exchange had been witnessed. My instinct was to turn to the girls and smile at them encouragingly. The one who had spoken smiled back at me and shrugged, but she had tears in her eyes. Then turning to her friend she said, 'I've no chance'. The following autumn term, I met one of the girls and asked after her friend who had hoped to do Chemistry. She told me her friend 'didn't get the grades' to get into St John's sixth form. I felt strongly from the exchange I observed between the year 11 girl and the teacher that it was something about the girl's appearance, and the teacher's assumption about her habitus - a lack of 'fit' with the school - which prompted the teacher to feel entitled to speak as she did. Bourdieu describes the dialectical relationship of how a working-class person's expectation of social limits become self-exclusionary. He explains:

Objective limits become a sense of limits, a practical anticipation of objective limits acquired by experience of objective limits, a 'sense of one's place' [...] leads one to exclude oneself from the goods, persons, places and so forth from which one is excluded.

(Bourdieu, 1984, p.471)

The girl appeared so quickly and easily crushed by the interchange that I wondered if she had expected to feel St John's was 'not for the likes of [her]' (Bourdieu, 1990a, p.56). Many of the working class moderately attaining girls in this study had stories about experiences which left them feeling similarly belittled by teachers. At the end of my first year researching in St John's, I met Miss Quick during the course of St John's UCAS day. A middle class, white teacher with many years of experience teaching Maths in London comprehensives, Miss Quick was happy to volunteer some observations about St John's. At one point, Miss Quick told me:

You won't find racism at St John's; here, it's all about class [...//] It goes by postcode. You won't hear anyone abusing anyone because of their ethnicity but you will hear nasty things about kids who are poor and who live in the wrong postcode.

Talking to Miss Quick, I recalled the exchange between the teacher and the year 11 girl and felt that the incident was perhaps an example of the type of ‘nasty thing’ to which Miss Quick felt some working-class students were susceptible at St John’s.

Sixth Form Open Evening

Teachers appeared more anxious to please and apparently less judgemental of prospective students when parents accompanied them on a visit to St John’s. The school’s sixth form open evening, attended by St John’s and visiting year 11 students and their parents, had a very different feel to the open day reserved for visiting year 11 students. The evening which I observed was held at the beginning of my student participants’ year 13, and St John’s worked hard to impress. Visitors were greeted by neatly dressed sixth formers who handed out glossy sixth form brochures, an itinerary of the evening and a map of the sixth form block with rooms open to visitors highlighted. During the first half of the evening, students and parents listened to several talks given by head of school, Mr Daniels, Head of Sixth Form, Mrs Jay, and Assistant Head, Mr Reid. After a welcome from Mr Daniels, Mr Reid explained the entrance requirements for St John’s sixth form and the types of subjects and extracurricular activities offered. A presentation delivered by Mrs Jay and Mr Daniels included expertly produced PowerPoints with graphs, statistics and diagrams, all illustrating St John’s A level successes and the numbers of students who annually progressed to Russell Group universities. Bar charts were used to compare St John’s results with its competitors. The impression was given, although not directly stated, that St John’s was the top performing sixth form in the area. My own research of league tables showed St John’s was second to another school, and third if a sixth form college was taken into consideration. The presentations were concluded with the Head Boy and Girl describing their experiences of being a St John’s sixth former and crediting the school’s teachers for their academic successes. The Head Boy told the audience of his offer to read medicine at Cardiff and the Head Girl of her offer to read History at Nottingham. Parents were then invited to walk around the Sixth Form block and visit classrooms where A level teachers were on hand to answer questions. There seemed to be an anxious ‘courtship’ being played out between school and parents, with each side hoping the other would choose *them*. In separate interviews, Mrs Jay and Mr Reid both spoke of the need, for funding

purposes, to attract as many year 11 students to St John's as possible. Nonetheless, the target of the school's open evening appeared to be students of a certain attainment type. The minimum entry requirement, a curriculum offer with an emphasis on traditional subjects and the stress on numbers progressing to Russell Group universities, all pointed to an exclusive interest in higher attaining groups. My notes about conversations held with parents, both at the sixth form open evening and during an HE and Careers event held later in the year, show I had the impression that all seemed anxious about their child 'getting in' to St John's sixth form. Families seemed to be aware that, ultimately, St John's did the choosing:

We just hope he gets in!

(Mother of year 11 boy, St John's Sixth Form Evening)

We were very lucky, she got in.

(Grandmother, St John's HE and Careers Evening)

The frequent use of the word 'we' was noticeable, and used whether or not the speaker was accompanied by other family members and/or the prospective sixth former. This use of 'we' called to mind Reay's (2015) work on the shared responsibility of social mobility which she described as being not so much 'an individualised project of self-advancement but much more of a family project' (p.11). At St John's, the 'family project' of getting a child into the school and then onto university extended to one grandmother acting in loco parentis for a working mother and father at the school's HE and Careers evening. The grandmother spoke about how important it was to the family that her granddaughter had 'got in' to St John's sixth form, and their hope that she would progress to university. It seemed clear that the grandmother's aspirations for her granddaughter formed part of the 'family project':

She's bright...not like the rest of us! (*Laughs*) So, she'll be going [to university].

(St John's grandmother, St John's HE and Careers Evening)

Parents (and grandparents) spoke as if 'getting into' St John's provided an automatic entry to university. One mother, accompanied by a son who she hoped would follow

his sister into St John's sixth form, explained that parents wanted their children at St John's because it was known locally as a 'good school' which 'gets kids into uni'. She explained that as non-Christians, her children had not been eligible for lower secondary but that selection for sixth form was different and did not require the family to be 'church goers'. Nevertheless, she felt,

Because it's a Church school, I think [St John's] is nicer, you get nicer kids than at some of the other schools.

(Mother, St John's Sixth Form Evening)

The impression I got from my conversation with the mother was that, despite not sharing the Christian values of St John's, she liked its 'academic' and Christian habitus. The fact that her daughter had successfully accessed the sixth form pointed to 'synergy' (Reay et al, 2005) between the family's habitus and St John's institutional habitus. Since the 'synergy' was not based on a shared faith, it suggested to me the daughter had successfully accessed sixth form because she was high attaining or at the very least, at the higher end of moderate attainment.

The importance of being 'recognised'

At St John's, Ella and Zoe were moderate attainers who were talented in ways they felt were not 'recognised' by their schools. Ella played several musical instruments to a high standard and had been selected to play saxophone for a national youth orchestra. Zoe played hockey competitively and had represented her county. Both girls were particularly sensitive to their school's academic aspirations and being made to feel that they and their extra-curricular achievements were not valued by the school. In separate interviews, Ella and Zoe both described feeling targeted by the headteacher, Mr Daniels, who had remonstrated with their year group for their poor AS results. Zoe told me, 'Because some of us didn't do so great in our ASs, he was telling us it was our fault the school was short of money now'. Ella's resentment over the way she felt treated was rooted in her perception of being 'used' by the school. She explained that she gave 'a lot of time to the school' through her music, in addition to representing the school in national competitions. She struggled to reconcile her feelings of being made to feel academically 'pretty average, or slightly above average', with St John's use of her musical talents:

I feel like I am used as marketing for the school. I play in their jazz band, orchestra, concert band, and I'm in their choir...I don't want to blow my own trumpet (*laughs*) but I am quite good at music and they want me to play in things because our school wants to look good. And our Head is quite keen on us looking official and proper.

(Ella St John's)

Many moderate attainers believed they mattered less to the school than the small clique of middle-class, high attaining girls who formed the school's Oxbridge Group. Moderate attainers Benny and Erica referred to the girls in the Oxbridge Group as the 'bang outs'. Benny explained a 'bang out' meant 'It's sort of boring...they just bang out the work, and nothing else'. In a similar way to Willis's (1977) 'ear oles', the term 'bang outs' appeared to be a term used by moderate attainers to imply the high attaining girls' conformity. When moderate attainers referred to the 'bang outs', it was without malice. However, they appeared to believe the girls and their attainment were mundane. Ella's criticisms were not directed at high attainers but at her school's preferential treatment of them:

If you're not [Oxbridge], you're the bottom of the pile. You're in the queue. There's a hierarchy. You can see it...people will be chosen to do things. When everyone thinks you're clever there's some kind of reverence in the way you're treated by the teachers [...//] If you're not clever, you don't get that sort of special treatment.

(Ella, St John's)

Ella's use of the word 'reverence' was illuminating since it suggested a relationship where power was reversed, with adults in the subordinate position. Zoe described how demoralising it was to sit in assemblies listening to 'constant' reminders of the 'Oxbridge and medicine group' and their achievements. She took little pride in her sporting achievements and this appeared to be because they were not 'recognised' by St John's. Zoe explained,

If you do sports, you're never recognised. Sports, music, singing...anything like that...you don't get recognised like someone who's academic. It's just...shoddy.

(Zoe, St John's)

By the end of year 12, Zoe's frustration with the casual and persistent preferential treatment of high attainers had turned to angry resentment. In a group interview with three other moderately attaining girls, she burst out:

It's *always* the elites...and everyone's meant to look up to them. (*Angry disbelief*) But they're just kids! Our own age group! It's always assemblies for the medical and Oxbridge lot. It's *Come and sign up for this. We've got this opportunity for Cambridge, we've got that for Oxford.* And I'm thinking, 'Well, I'm not that...and I can't go for that...or that, or that one...O, that's another one I can't go for!' (*all laughing in recognition*). We're just scum.

(Zoe, St John's)

It is hard to convey the bitterness with which Zoe delivered her final words and her attitude as she slumped back sulkily in her chair. Zoe's use of 'elites' and 'scum' indicated how deeply wounding she found the student hierarchy at St John's. Whilst no teachers used the word 'elites' to describe high attaining students at St John's, Hallingford's Head of Sixth Form did. I was surprised to hear it used by some Hallingford and St John's moderately attaining students. Zoe's use of 'elites' was without irony, which suggested a student hierarchy had become normalised at St John's.

In our first interview at the start of her sixth form, Zoe came across as a confident and happy girl. She described how hard she had worked for her four As and seven Bs at GCSE and felt her attainment was 'above average'. She became emotional when describing her gratitude for the extra support she had been given throughout lower secondary after attaining a poor CAT score in year 7.⁴¹ Zoe's loss of confidence by the end of year 12 appeared largely to have emanated from struggles with her A levels. In a one to one interview, she came across as angry and frustrated that high

⁴¹ CAT – Cognitive Assessment Test, commonly taken by year 7 pupils.

attainers were being given 'all the extra support' by teachers. She told me she believed middle attainers like her were overlooked:

They never take any care about any of us who are just standard, in the middle...you know, just average. If you don't get A*s and As they don't notice you...If you get As it's 'O, let's try her in a talented group!'...They get all the support. But if you get Bs and Cs it's, 'O, they'll be alright, they don't need any special help'...but we do need help every now and then.

(Zoe, St John's)

Zoe's position as a moderately attaining sixth former highlighted the shift in St John's priorities once students reached sixth form where A grades, rather than the A-C economy became the focus of teachers' efforts. It seemed that St John's moderate attainers were 'collateral damage' in a competitive local sixth form market (see Weale, 2017a) and St John's position as an 'academic' sixth form. Zoe's attainment and aspirations to study Sports Sciences at a 'new' university were unlikely to contribute in any meaningful way to St John's competitive edge in this market. In the rationing of sixth form resources, therefore, Zoe, and other moderate attainers like her, 'required no urgent treatment' (Gillborn and Youdell, 2000, p.199).

In my second interview with Erica, a working-class moderate attainer, she revealed that she had decided to leave St John's at the end of Year 12. She told me she was 'struggling' with her AS levels and 'not enjoying them' and did not want to go to university. She attained an A, three Bs, three Cs and a D for her GCSEs, which she described as 'alright'. However, after her year 12 mocks, Erica was predicted Ds and Es for her A levels and could not 'see the point' of staying on for year 13. She had always been 'somewhere in the middle' at St John's:

We in-the-middle-kids, the school doesn't really care...it's all the bright kids, they obviously want to get them into Oxford and Cambridge...and it's like, *the rest of you can go wherever you want, we don't really care.*

(Erica, St John's)

When I asked Erica if she really thought the school did not 'care', she answered, 'Maybe they do, but it feels like they don't care'. After talking to her musician friends

and researching online, Erica applied to study for a diploma in music production at music college. When we met for interview, she had just received an unconditional offer and was excited about starting her new course. I asked if she had told anyone she was leaving, to which Erica waved her hand dismissively. She said she had told two teachers who she considered ‘friends’. Erica seemed touched when they had responded to her news with, ‘You can’t leave!’ However, neither had attempted to talk over her decision with her.

Subject choice

If my St John’s student sample was representative, students entering its Sixth Form from other schools were more likely to be high than moderately attaining. Three of the four new students in my initial sample group of 18 students, were high attainers. One attained ten A*s, one eight A*s and one seven A*s. One moderately attaining student from another school, Vicky, attained an A in Maths, eight Bs and a C. Although not among the highest attaining moderate attainers, Vicky’s attainment was respectably moderate and ‘good enough’ (Archer, 2008) to access St John’s sixth form. She also had a mother who worked at the school.

Once students had accessed Sixth Form, GCSE attainment was also used to ascertain eligibility for subject choices. St John’s pride in its ‘academic’ status meant a far stronger focus on facilitating than other types of subjects. Typically, moderate attainers chose to study at least one non-facilitating subject. Moderate attainer Ella told me, ‘Students who study ‘soft’ A levels are looked down on at [St John’s]’.⁴² My interviews with students revealed that moderate attainers were more likely than high attainers to experience problems resulting from their subject choices. Certainly, students studying ‘newer’ (‘soft’) subjects were more likely to experience timetabling problems. Moderate attainers Memphis and Michael had to travel to another school for their Media Studies lessons, and in so doing missed the weekly extended form period allocated to HE choosing and UCAS applications. Similarly, Benny studied both Music and Music Technology A levels. Although these subjects were both taught at St John’s, timetabling made it impossible to attend all lessons for

⁴² Only Ella used ‘soft’ to describe non-facilitating subjects. Generally, when students and teachers in this study wished to distinguish between ‘newer’ and facilitating (traditional) A levels, they referred to ‘less academic’ and ‘academic’ A levels.

both subjects. Benny explained that he had to try and make up anything he missed in his own time. Another issue was turnover and uneven quality of teaching for 'newer' and vocational subjects popular with moderate attainers. Some of my interviews involved long, upsetting accounts of moderate attainers trying to learn these subjects from their text books independently owing to the lack of a subject teacher, or problems with an inexperienced teacher. None of the problems experienced by moderate attainers in relation to subject choices and teachers were reported by high attainers.

'Cooled out' and 'warmed up'

In addition to the practical difficulties that some moderate attainers experienced with the timetabling of their subject choices, Ella explained that studying non-facilitating subjects had other consequences. She had been a member of the school's 'Gifted and Talented' group (G&T) because of her musicianship. However, senior management had carried out a 'cull' of all students studying 'soft' subjects on entry to sixth form. As a student of Music and Sociology A levels, Ella was one of the students who was 'culled'. She explained:

So us students studying 'soft' subjects were sent letters home *requiring* us, I think it was, not to attend any more meetings...something like that...(pause)
I was gutted.

Before I met moderate attainer Amy for our first interview, Mrs Jay's assistant, Miss Harrison, told me how excited and disbelieving she was when it was confirmed she would be taking part in my research. She had told Miss Harrison, 'No-one ever chooses me for anything, Miss'. My interview with Amy started with a short discussion about her GCSEs. She appeared apologetic when she told me that she got 'mostly Bs'; however, closer questioning revealed Amy also attained an A* in RE and an A in Art and IT. She sounded proud when she told me that she would be the first go to university in her family. None of her family 'were any good at school'. Her brother was a car mechanic and she described her father 'as a sort of accountant'. A large part of our first interview was taken up with an upsetting story about Amy's battle to do A level Maths. Her account of wanting to study Maths was illustrative of the types of formal selective practices used by both St John's and

Hallingford to ensure moderate attainers were ‘cooled out’ of certain subject choices (Hopper, 1972; Ball, 1981; Gillborn and Youdell, 2000).

At St John’s, any student who wished to study A level Maths had to attain at least a B Grade at GCSE as well as pass an internal school test.⁴³ When we first met, Amy was taking A levels in English, History, Psychology and RE. However, Amy told me, ‘Maths is my *favourite* lesson’. Her account of attempts to study A level Maths started with an explanation of St John’s GCSE English and Maths sets. Amy explained that, as a member of ‘Core One’ Maths, she had been predicted an A or B. She described attending St John’s Sixth Form Open Evening held in the first term of her year 11. During the evening, she went to see the Head of Maths, Mr Sumner, to ask about taking A level Maths:

Being that I was in Core One, he said that it would be difficult for me because of my prediction. Mr Sumner told me that in November...as soon as I walked in the door, he said, ‘I suggest you don’t really take it.’

(Amy, St John’s)

Amy had been taken aback that Mr Sumner appeared to have already made up his mind about her. In spite of this, Amy still hoped to study Maths at A level. In addition to attaining at least a B at GCSE, Amy knew that she would be required to pass a test. Amy’s distress over not being allowed to take Maths started with her being unaware that the test was held immediately after her GCSES, while she was away. On her return, Amy went into the school expecting to be given a date for the test:

I spoke to Miss Harrison and she was like, ‘Just take it today’; and I said, ‘But I haven’t been revising or anything, and it’s been two months since I’ve done Maths’. And she was like ‘If you don’t do well, I’ll get you to re-take it, just do it.’ I was really panicking about the test...I thought, ‘I’ve got to do it, I’ve got to do it, to get into Maths’.

(Amy, St John’s)

⁴³ At the time of my research, this applied only to Maths A level at St John’s. At Hallingford, students wishing to take Maths and Sciences A levels had to pass internal tests.

Amy failed the test and when she went in to school to get her GCSE results there was a rushed attempt to re-sit the test:

So, I was all stressed out in the Maths test, with my GCSE results in my pocket. I hadn't even opened them...and then I was doing the test...And then after all that I went to see Mr Sumner, and he just said, 'Don't take it'. He didn't even mark my test! (*indignant*) I said, 'Don't mark it, then...because I'm not going to be allowed to take it, am I?' (*hurt*) So, he didn't mark it...(long pause) But I hope I passed! (*Laughs weakly*).

(Amy, St John's)

Amy's weak laugh suggested to me that she suspected she passed and could see the irony of the situation. She continued:

But actually, saying that...I'm not sure if it wouldn't be (*long pause*) like a bit (*hesitant*) demeaning...if I passed and he then said, 'Don't take it'. But I wish I did do Maths...but I wasn't allowed. I would have liked to have had a go [...//] He said, 'If you want a B or an A, do something different than Maths', because if I did Maths I probably would get Cs 'n stuff.

(Amy, St John's)

At one point in Amy's long account, she was fighting back tears. She appeared to me to have been worn down by the hoops through which she had to jump to study Maths A level. It seemed that Mr Sumner's estimation of Amy's suitability for Maths, not the test, proved an insurmountable obstacle. Amy was encouraged to do English A level instead. I told her I was surprised by this since English did not strike me as an obvious substitute for Maths. Amy responded, 'Yeah, but it was all that would fit on my timetable'. In common with many school sixth forms, students' subject choices at St John's were restricted to different subject blocks, preventing some combinations.

Teacher problems

The treatment that some moderate attainers described receiving from teachers in the classroom was another area where they felt discriminated against. Often told as part of a wider ranging response to a question about subject choice or HE choosing,

several St John's moderately attaining students had anecdotes about being humiliated by teachers. (No such anecdotes were told by high attainers in either Hallingford or St John's.) The casual sexism of some male teachers reported by some moderately attaining girls surprised me most.⁴⁴ For example, moderate attainer Vicky told me about the teacher who predicted her a D in her AS level Economics, and who asked her if she had 'smiled prettily at the examiner' when she attained a B. Ella told me that she had a reputation for being 'gobby'. When I asked her to explain, Ella said there were two male teachers who she felt did not like her because she was outspoken. She gave an example of how she once challenged one of these teachers for emailing extra-curricular reading only to high attainers. Ever since, the teacher had taken opportunities to 'put [Ella] down in front of the class'. Ella told me she deflected jokes made at her expense by saying, 'I wouldn't get that, Sir, I'm too thick'. Although hurt, Ella's anger at what she believed to be unfair treatment by teachers made her uniquely assertive among moderate attainers. She pointed out that boys or high attaining girls were never put down by this teacher. Nonetheless, boys could also be the victims of sexism too. Patrick said that high attaining girls were liked by all the teachers. He described one of his teachers who liked to 'banter and joke with' the girls in class. However, the same teacher was 'aggressive' towards him,

...like when you're sitting in a class with really intelligent people, it's quite difficult to give your opinion and then to be destroyed by him. Like when you give an answer, he just intimidates you.

(Patrick, St John's)

Patrick described the teacher as discriminatory towards anyone who was not 'Oxbridge' but felt that he was treated especially harshly as a moderately attaining boy. In addition, several St John's moderate attainers reported problems where the quality of teaching impacted negatively on their learning. The vast majority of moderate attainers at both Hallingford and St John's chose to study A level [Subject

⁴⁴ The treatment of moderately attaining girls, in particular, by teachers at Hallingford and St John's was an unexpected finding and appears an under researched area.

A].⁴⁵ In a group interview with Amy, Zoe and their two moderately attaining friends, Jennie said she felt ‘conned’ into doing [Subject A]. She described a sample lesson the teacher had given during St John’s Sixth Form Open Evening: ‘He made it seem like so *fun!*’ Chantelle agreed, adding that none of the teacher’s classes matched this early promise, and problems were exacerbated by frequent absences. Jennie said:

We’ve had substitute teachers all the time. We’ve had three or four teachers this year for Sociology and then all the crap with [Subject A teacher]. We have Miss Shaw now for Sociology and she’s great. She got our grades up, definitely. But [Subject A] is a joke.

Amy, Chantelle and Jennie described trying to teach themselves [Subject A] from the textbook. Amy said she thought she ‘was on a B’ and became very upset when she discovered she was predicted a D or E for her AS level. She went to speak to her teacher:

...and his words to me were, ‘Your whole class is on the road to failing so don’t worry about it. You’re not the only one’. Then, because I hadn’t done so good in English, I got 9 out of 21 in my English mock, he said ‘So, it doesn’t matter which subject you drop, does it?’

(Amy, St John’s)

Amy said she was ‘told to drop’ English instead of [Subject A] after failing her English mock. She described being so ‘stressed out’ over this, especially since she had wanted to study Maths ‘in the first place’, that she ran home in tears. She told me, ‘I think maybe I’ve done the wrong subjects...I should have done Sociology’.⁴⁶ The girls used their group interview to tell me about two other subjects where their moderately attaining friends were being taught by substitute teachers after the abrupt departure of one of the teachers early in year 12 and the other being on long-term sick.

⁴⁵ In this section, and further on when discussing Hallingford teachers, I have removed the name of the subject wherever a teacher about whom moderate attainers complained may be identified.

⁴⁶ After a meeting held between Amy, Amy’s mother and Head of Sixth Form, Mrs Jay, Amy was allowed to drop [Subject A] instead of English.

As with the majority of moderate attainers I interviewed, the girls gave liking and/or being 'good at' a subject as a reason for choosing to study a subject for A level (see Vidal-Rodeiro, 2007). Some chose subjects because they attained a better grade in one subject than another. Amy chose [Subject A] because it was something 'new' and looked 'fun', echoing Vidal-Rodeiro's (2007) research findings on reasons for students' choice of 'newer', as opposed to traditional, facilitating subjects. However, unlike the majority of students in Vidal-Rodeiro's research, none of the moderate attainers I interviewed reported having been given advice on their subject choices. Amy's only conversation about her subjects was with the Head of Maths who did not want her to study Maths A level. Of the other three girls who took part in our group interview, Zoe and Jennie were advised by older sisters and Chantelle spoke to her mother. Similarly, moderate attainer, Simon, told me that no-one had advised him on his A level subjects at St John's. Like Jennie and Zoe, Simon was helped by his older sister. However, as a medical student, Simon's sister's expertise appeared restricted by her own knowledge and experience. On her advice, Simon chose A levels in Economics, Biology and Chemistry. Simon struggled with two Science A levels and finally attained a B in Economics, and a D and E in Biology and Chemistry. When I met Simon after he had received his A level results, he had recently returned from a tour of Europe playing trumpet with a national orchestra. He told me he regretted not taking Music A level:

If I had my time again, I'd have chosen Music and Politics with Economics.
Thing was, Music wasn't considered a proper subject at St John's.

(Simon, St John's)

Mr Reid, Assistant Head with responsibility for the sixth form curriculum at John's, insisted all year 11 students were interviewed by a senior teacher about their subject choices. It is possible some students had forgotten being interviewed, which suggests they were unmemorable, or that some missed their interviews and were not followed up. If there was an interview to help students with their subject choices, moderate attainers appeared to have received little constructive advice. High attainers, in contrast, described being actively 'warmed up' by different subject teachers keen to have them in their sixth form classes. All high attainers reported having discussed their subject choices with at least one teacher.

Gaming the league tables?

In a similar way to the ‘gaming’ of GCSE league tables which saw schools ‘enthusiastically’ embracing vocational courses in order to boost performance on the ‘5+ GCSEs at grade A*–C’ measure’ (Jin, Muriel, Sibieta, 2011, p.62), gaming appears to have taken place at A level in my schools, with students of different GCSE attainment steered towards or away from certain subjects. I was to learn during the course of my research that students’ wellbeing was unlikely to be the reason why they were ‘warmed up’ or ‘cooled out’ (Hopper, 1972; Ball, 1981; Gillborn and Youdell, 2000) in relation to their subject choices. Two teachers, one from Hallingford and one from Parklands, spoke to me about the annual inter-departmental competition to recruit high attaining students. One teacher explained the impact on a department’s grade averages that ‘even a couple of lower attainers’ could have. For similar reasons, it seemed students who underperformed at AS level were ‘weeded out’ at Parklands and St John’s.

Miss Shaw, Head of Social Sciences at St John’s, explained her resistance to being ‘selective’ for Sociology:

I don’t want to be selective, so I have one of the lowest entry criteria. So, sometimes, [students] can’t do anything else other than Sociology or Business Studies...there’s no other option, because no other subject will take them. But mostly they choose to do Sociology because they enjoyed it at GCSE. [...//] As long as they work hard and take the advice, I don’t think a C is necessarily an indicator of anything, anyway...and we get good value added. So, yeah, we take the weaker kids but we get good results with them.

(Miss Shaw, St John’s)

Miss Shaw pointed out that students of ‘so-called soft subjects’, such as Psychology and Sociology A level, were a valuable asset to the school:

We [the Social Sciences department] bring a lot of money into the school. So, like Psychology...over 90 kids do it. It's the biggest A level in the school...and for Sociology, it's around 50 in Year 12 and about 40 in Year 13.

(Miss Shaw, St John's)

Miss Shaw told me that increasing numbers of high attaining students wanted to study Sociology but that St John's Senior Management actively discouraged them, in the belief that 'newer' subjects reduced students' chances of accessing 'elite' universities. She pointed out, in a way that made me believe she understood the irony, that she had taught several high attaining students who had done very well in A level Sociology. In the last two years, two had attained A* in their A level and had progressed to study Human, Social and Political Sciences (HSPS) at Cambridge and another girl studying Psychology had an offer to study HSPS that year.

Hallingford

Entry criteria

Hallingford did not formally select for sixth form entry but individual courses had entry criteria which were inconsistently applied. Several selective practices emerged from interviews with Hallingford's students and staff which seemed at odds with the school's comprehensive status. Practices which sorted students in ways which distinguished high from other kinds of attainers were systemic and integral to the school's culture and travelled from GCSE into sixth form. The most evident selective practice was the allocation of students to a hierarchy of form groups, according to GCSE attainment, as the following table explains:

Table 19

Hallingford's hierarchy of form groups			
Form Tutor	Form Group⁴⁷	Level 3 qualification	Typical Progression
Mr Derbyshire (Sciences)	'Top' (the 'elites')	A levels	Oxbridge and other 'elite' universities
Mr Riley (Sciences)	'Second Tier'	A levels	Less competitive Russell Group and 'good' universities
Mr Wakefield (Sciences)	'B' students / 'B' kids	A levels and Applied A levels	Mostly 'new' universities; some 'good' universities
Mr Douglas (Sciences)	'The BTECs'	Applied A levels and BTECs	A mixture of 'new' universities, college, apprenticeships and jobs; some 'good' universities

Each of the four form tutors to whom I spoke pointed out that the hierarchy of form groups was not 'official'. However, as Mr Riley, form tutor to a 'second tier' form group pointed out, 'Kids aren't stupid' and it was 'pretty obvious' from students' subject choices and post-school aspirations which form group they were in.

Subject choice

My introduction to subject choice as a selective practice at Hallingford came early in my research in the school. In my first interview with moderate attainer, Ravi, he explained he had not been allowed to take A levels in Biology and Chemistry because he attained a C in his English GCSE and was told to take an A level in Applied Sciences. Ravi spoke fluent French but was told by friends that Maths and Sciences were 'better' A levels than languages. Ravi appeared to struggle with his subject choices and what he described as the 'jump from GCSE'. At the end of year 12, Ravi left for college.

⁴⁷ Names used to describe students by form tutors and other members of staff.

I met Aran and Tom, two year 12 boys studying BTECs and Applied A levels, in the sixth form common room when they came up to ask me about my research. They wanted to tell me about being 'made to do' BTECs. Aran, whose GCSE attainment suggested he was at the lower end of moderate attainment, was angry that he had not been allowed to 'have a go' at Physics A level. He explained he had the 'necessary entry criteria' for A levels of five GCSE passes, including Maths and English, with a B in Maths. However, for reasons Aran did not fully understand, his Bs and Cs at GCSE meant that the only A level he had been allowed to do was Applied Business, which he was now taking with a BTEC in Applied Science. Tom's GCSE attainment of four GCSEs suggested he would qualify as a lower, rather than a moderate attainer. He had Bs in Maths and Science and said he was 'good at Maths'. His shame over being forced to study BTECs (Burgess, 2015) appeared to stem from a culture where high attainment in academic subjects was valorised. With the help of a private tutor, Tom was studying for two additional GCSEs. His ambition to study A levels lay in his conviction that they were a superior qualification. He compared BTECs with a gift watch which 'looks good but [is] a fake'. He told me, 'BTECs are for stupid people'. Aran thumped Tom at this; however, Tom gave me a look and a shrug of the shoulders which I took to mean 'Why pretend?' Aran and Tom's sense of injustice was directly linked to being excluded from 'high status' (Ball, 1981), traditional, A level subjects. In a similar way to Amy at St John's, Aran felt pre-judged. He wanted to 'have a go' at a subject he had enjoyed at GCSE.

When I asked Helen, a member of Hallingford's sixth form support staff responsible for BTEC students, about Aran wanting to take Physics A level she said he was being 'unrealistic'. I told Helen that I understood Aran had the pre-requisite B in GCSE Maths to study Physics to which she said, 'You'll find he failed the test, then'. I was surprised by Helen's reference to 'the test' as if it was something I would know about. Up to this point in my research I had believed that the practice of students having to pass a test to be able to study for an A level was unique to St John's. Helen's comments also made me wonder if Aran omitted to tell me he had not passed the necessary test to study Physics A level.

All students at both Hallingford and St John's had to pass a test in order to be allowed to study Maths. At Hallingford, students also sat tests for Science A levels.

In addition to these tests, moderate attainers also experienced other, mostly informal ways, which suggested they may have been ‘cooled out’ of some subjects. Zane appeared to have been ‘cooled out’ from AS Business:

They said it’s not running this year... Well, that's what I was told, and that's why I couldn't pick it. But then I've heard that people were doing AS Business but when I asked, they said it was full. So, I don't know what's going on there...

Although Zane had attained an A in GCSE Business Studies, he attained a C in Maths, and wondered if this might have made him ineligible for AS Business.⁴⁸ Zane came under pressure to study English A level instead. In spite of attaining a B in English at GCSE, Zane struggled with A level English and ended up dropping it.

Teacher problems

The allocation of teachers appears to be a way in which schools may differentiate resources. As at St John’s, Hallingford moderate attainers studying ‘newer’ and vocational subjects were more likely to experience problems with their teachers than high attainers studying facilitating subjects. Stacey told me of her [Subject B] A level teacher who left suddenly in year 12, only to be replaced by a young, inexperienced teacher. Stacey explained, ‘She’s never taught before and, honestly, she doesn’t know what she’s doing. And now she’s off sick’. In addition, instead of six taught lessons a week which Hallingford assigned to every A level subject, [Subject B] had been timetabled for only four. Stacey said her mother came into the school to speak to Mr Nelson about the teaching of [Subject B] but nothing happened. Stacey said, ‘Since it’s [Subject B], nobody cares’. She described her class of [Subject B] students trying to teach themselves. She told me, ‘We’re all really scared’, explaining they all expected to do badly.

A more disturbing way in which teachers appeared to be engaged in selective practices, at least according to the accounts of some of the moderately attaining students I interviewed, was behaviour that seemed designed to exclude them. Moderate attainers told stories of being singled out for treatment which they believed

⁴⁸ AS Business was deemed to be a superior qualification to an Applied A level in Business. See Aran, above.

was meant to encourage them to drop a subject. Neena's account involved her [Subject C] teacher. Neena said she was constantly 'picked on' in class and believed the teacher wanted to make her give up. Neena explained:

What she does is, she gets rid of you if you're not as good. She did it [last year]. Sorry, but she's a crap teacher so she needs students in her class who get As.

Neena's solution was to 'bunk off' classes and her older sister, who had attained an A in [Subject C], coached her at home. However, the teacher then insisted Neena should not be allowed to sit the AS exam because she had not attended lessons. At this point, the Deputy Head of Sixth Form, Mr Windsor, discreetly arranged for Neena to take the exam separately and hidden from view. In this way, Neena was able to take her exam without her [Subject C] teacher's knowledge.⁴⁹

Another moderate attainer, Mahnoor, described being the only girl studying with three boys in her [Subject D] class. She described feeling constantly belittled by the teacher in front of the boys. At one point, she became upset as she described what had happened when she attained a D in her mock AS level. She said the teacher 'flung down' her exam paper and 'shouted' at her:

He started with: 'I don't think [Subject D] is for you...you'll just end up having to do re-takes'. But the one thing he did say (*voice trembling*) which hurts me the most...he said, 'You're just not in the same league as the boys'. That's what he said...that I wasn't in the same league as them. It was just...(*crying*) the worst thing.

(Mahnoor, Hallingford)

Several students gave accounts of teacher behaviour they experienced as exclusionary, but Neena and Mahnoor's stories illustrate most graphically the methods which moderate attainers believed were designed to exclude them. By creating an environment in which students felt intimidated or were made to feel stupid, these students felt unwelcome in the classroom. Neena appeared to believe that her teacher did not want her in class for reasons to do with grade average and

⁴⁹ Neena attained a C in her AS [Subject C]. She did not take it at A level.

performance whilst Mahnoor was confused by her teacher's unkindness. However, being compared negatively to 'the boys' pointed to overtly sexist bullying and discrimination based on her sex and attainment.

Moderately attaining girls at both Hallingford and St John's more often than boys reported being the 'butt' of teachers' jokes in class. However, all moderately attaining students had anecdotes about being in classes or form periods where they felt ignored, and/or where teachers directed most of their teaching or conversation at high attainers. Conversations with the women who comprised the sixth form team at Hallingford and with Miss Harrison, assistant to St John's Head of Sixth Form Mrs Jay, made it clear that schools were aware of 'problem' teachers, even if officially such issues were ignored.⁵⁰ Many moderate attainers described feeling that they and their subjects did not matter to the school. A total of six St John's (including two girls who took part in a group interview) and two Hallingford moderate attainers suffered at least one prolonged teacher absenteeism and/or more than one substitute teacher.⁵¹ All the moderate attainers in my sample groups wanted to do well and described working hard to make up for lack of teaching.

No high attainers reported poor treatment by teachers nor did any high attainers report being taught by substitute teachers. Recent research found that higher qualified teachers were most attracted to schools with high attainment and with advantaged students (Brown, 2015, p.287). It is possible also that the current crisis in teacher recruitment and retention (see House of Commons report, 2018) impacts more heavily on certain attainment groups. Certainly, at Hallingford and St John's, it appeared that on the whole facilitating subjects taken by high attainers were taught by the most experienced teachers. Further, poor teaching and /or teacher turnover appeared to have a harmful impact on moderate attainers' attainment (Ronfeldt, Loeb and Wyckof, 2012). Of the girls who continued with [Subject A] in St John's, only Vicky attained a B. However, she was helped by a private tutor. Vicky told me the rest of her class either failed or attained 'Ds 'n stuff'. Students told me that the teacher of [Subject A] left St John's and believed he had decided to leave teaching.

⁵⁰ I promised confidentiality to members of staff who spoke about 'problem' teachers. I have therefore presented their awareness of issues with certain teachers as accurately as possible without compromising these assurances. Students who described their experiences have since left school.

⁵¹ One long-term absenteeism at Hallingford was due to maternity leave.

At Hallingford, Stacey was so ashamed of her [Subject B] A level grade that she did want to tell me what it was.

Testing Hallingford's comprehensive ethos

I interviewed Mr Nelson, Hallingford's Head of Sixth Form once on his own in year 12 and once in a shorter interview with his Deputy, Mr Windsor in year 13. In our first interview, I sensed some unease, which was unusual in Mr Nelson. I wondered if this was because he was unsure of how to treat me. I had met Mr Nelson several times before; not only did I conduct part of my Master's research in Hallingford's Sixth Form, but over 13 years ago, I had a teacher training placement at the school. Superficially, Mr Nelson and I have always got on well. However, in interview, the register of Mr Nelson's language kept shifting, and this made me feel he was uncomfortable with some of my questions. I wondered if his discomfort might be in relation to the restrictiveness of some of the entry criteria for his ostensibly comprehensive sixth form. At first, when describing entry to Hallingford's Sixth Form, Mr Nelson adopted formal language, and was straightforward and confident:

We definitely see ourselves as a comprehensive at Hallingford, and as such we should offer a wide range of different options (...//) There's always something for students to do in our sixth form, the curriculum is fully comprehensive. So, there are Level 2 qualifications and a number of Level 3 qualifications. (...//) We still adhere to the idea that a qualification is accessible to a large number of people.

(Mr Nelson, Hallingford)

However, when asked specifically about the entry requirements for Hallingford's sixth form, Mr Nelson's formal register suddenly switched, and he appeared almost flippant:

The entry requirement to get into Sixth Form would *beeeeeee (long pause, apparently trying to remember)*...for our own students? (*Dramatic pause*) Any qualification! (*Laughs*).

(Mr Nelson, Hallingford)

It was hard to judge whether Mr Nelson was trying to stress the inclusive entry requirements for his sixth form, or whether he felt they were absurd. He delivered his last sentence as if it were the punchline of a joke, and then elaborated with a return to a more formal register:

They'd need at least two Cs and three Ds to get on to the Level 2 course, and a Level 2 course will then enable them to access a Level 3 course, later on. (...//) If they want to go straight onto a Level 3, A level GCE course, then each subject has different entry requirements, but on the whole, they're [GCSE] B grades.

(Mr Nelson, Hallingford)

With Tom and Aran in mind, I asked Mr Nelson to explain how many GCSEs, and what grades, would be needed to take an A level in Maths or a Science.

We still adhere to the idea that a B grade at GCSE should enable you to access most of the content of an A level, but you may not get an A in it... (...//) To do a Level 3 academic A level course, you would need a minimum of five B's, yeah...

(Mr Nelson, Hallingford)⁵²

Mr Nelson's repetition of the phrase 'we still adhere to' alerted my attention. I wondered if the formality of the language was because Mr Nelson was quoting official school policy, as opposed to what might happen in reality, and asked him whether a student might need an A at GCSE to be *confident* of being accepted to do Maths or a Science A level. Mr Nelson was quite clear:

Nope...Maths, it's a B and you sit a small test. And Chemistry is the same: it's a B and you sit a small test and Physics is the same...a B, and you sit a small test.

Mr Nelson's repeated use of the word 'small' suggested to me he wished to downplay the use of entrance tests for Maths and Science A levels. His 'throwaway' remark that students needed a minimum of five Bs to take A levels was one I missed

⁵² By 'academic' A level, Mr Nelson means a traditional A level, not an Applied A level.

at the time. I later learnt that it applied to external students, which suggests that Hallingford *did* select for sixth form. In addition, some moderate attainers' accounts revealed that they believed, as fact, that in addition to a B in the relevant subject, they needed Bs in English and Maths GCSE to be eligible for some A level subjects. To add to the confusion, entry criteria for A levels appeared to be inconsistently applied. Some moderate attainers were studying for Humanities and 'newer' subjects, for which they attained a C at GCSE. Mr Nelson's use of 'academic' as a qualifier to distinguish traditional A levels from Applied A levels, gave the impression he felt it was important to distinguish between the status of the two qualifications. In addition, the setting of tests and different entry criteria for different A levels implied that some subjects were deemed higher status than others.⁵³

Parklands

Selection and 'weeding out'

Head of Parklands Sixth Form, Mrs Dawson explained that, as a rule, Parklands did not accept many new boys into its sixth form. At the time of my research, there were 170 boys in year 12 and 170 in year 13 and the school was reluctant to increase class sizes. Boys who applied for sixth form had to have a minimum of six A*s at GCSE, and A*s in the three subjects chosen for A level. In addition, applicants sat written tests in their A level subjects and an essay writing paper. They were also interviewed by the Head and Deputy Head of Sixth Form and three subject teachers. New boy Tristan, who I interviewed in the first term of year 12, explained that he had been the only boy accepted out of 15 candidates. In addition to having attained highly at GCSE, Crispin had grade 8 in violin.

Many Parklands boys described their pride in being part of a school which, in spite of being selective and fee-paying, also enjoyed a reputation for tolerance and diversity. In addition to a broad ethnic mix, the school strongly encouraged a range of creative and cultural extra-curricular activities; it was part of the ethos of Parklands that boys should be able perform academically while making a 'contribution to the wider life of the school' (Mrs Dawson), such as through music, drama and sport. Moderate attainer and jazz drummer Danny described himself as 'at

⁵³ Applied A levels were discontinued in summer 2016.

the lower end academically'. Nonetheless, he enjoyed his reputation as 'a bit of maverick' (Danny) amongst his high attaining peers. He played several musical instruments and was in the school's orchestra as well as several of its bands. Zac, who described himself as being among Parklands' 'lower achievers', was considered the school's 'top' rugby player and was also highly rated as an actor. Both boys described feeling valued because of their 'contribution to the wider life of the school'. To be 'quirky' (Danny) and skilled in sports and/or the creative arts were qualities admired by boys and staff and gave moderate attainers Danny and Zac status in their academic school.

Nonetheless, for students who 'underperformed' (Mrs Dawson) at AS level, Parklands could be harsh. Three moderate attainers, Ash, Jacob and Marlon, left Parklands at the end of year 12 because they attained 'very poor grades' (Mrs Dawson) at AS level. In a follow up interview, Jacob was bitter. He pointed out that others had attained AS grades similar to his own and been allowed to progress to year 13. A county football player, Jacob felt his football was not 'rated the same as rugby' and that this had contributed to his 'constructive dismissal'. The conditions on which he would have been allowed to remain at Parklands included studying only two A levels, making it unlikely that Jacob could progress to a 'any decent uni' (Jacob). My surprise over the way in which Ash, Jacob and Marlon described their 'constructive dismissal' during meetings with the school's senior management, which they all found humiliating and unfair, forced me to re-evaluate some of my pre-conceptions about the extent of Parklands' 'tolerance' (Willis, 2005, p.62).

UCAS Preparation days

Every student who wishes to progress to HE must apply through the online UCAS application. Students usually complete their UCAS application during the first term of Year 13, the final year of sixth form. The online process is relatively straightforward: students enter their personal details, academic qualifications to date and predicted A level grades. They then choose five degree courses, usually at five different institutions. Within these five choices, students select one as their 'aspirational' or first choice. This will be the most desired university course and usually one demanding the highest entry qualifications. Students are also encouraged

to include an 'insurance' choice; that is, a university/degree course with lower entry qualifications.

As is common in many schools, each of my school sixth forms sets time aside at the end of year 12 to provide information to students about, and help them begin to prepare for, the UCAS application process. At both Hallingford and St John's, this comprised one day. At Parklands, UCAS preparation was spread over two days. However, the second day was light-hearted, and focused on 'soft' skills, such as interview technique and presentation skills. It did not entail any form of support for applying to university.

Hallingford

The first UCAS day I observed at Hallingford took place in the summer before my research began. I used the day as an opportunity for one of two preliminary visits during which I was free to move around the school and observe anything I chose.⁵⁴ Year 12s spent the whole morning of Hallingford's UCAS day in a school hall with one 20-minute break, listening to a series of speakers. Two talks were given by the Head of Sixth Form and Head of School. Talks were unscripted and appeared to do little more than stress the value of university for future earning power. A talk given by a representative from a leading London Russell Group university was also unscripted and came across as a polished stand-up act, including jokes about what *not* to include in a personal statement. The talk was long, and was not helped by the fact that there was no PowerPoint and no hand-outs. By the end of it, a number of students were texting, some were dozing and others listening to music through their ear buds. I missed a talk given on HE choosing by an admissions tutor from a red brick, non-Russell Group university. Students appeared to have found it unmemorable.

Students spent the afternoon in their form groups. The intention of this session was to help students to set up their UCAS accounts and start drafting their personal statements. I was permitted to observe any form group I wished and because workshops were divided into two different time slots, I was able to observe two form

⁵⁴ I used part of my second UCAS day observation to conduct two interviews with teachers, and did not observe afternoon workshops. The format of the two UCAS days were identical.

groups. As it turned out, observation of these two groups provided a dramatic contrast as to the level of support given to high and moderately attaining HE applicants. The first session I observed started with the form tutor giving a PowerPoint presentation introducing the UCAS application process. The presentation included screenshots which took students, step by step, through the process of setting up their UCAS accounts, after which there was a PowerPoint presentation on how to structure a personal statement with advice on content. Students were then encouraged to start writing their statements. The form tutor moved around the room answering any queries and offering one to one advice where needed. The atmosphere was relaxed; students chatted but most were also engaged and 'on task'. Two boys appeared uninterested in starting their personal statement and spent the time researching university websites. By the end of the session, all had successfully completed their UCAS registration and some had started writing their personal statements. A brief chat with the form tutor revealed that most of her form group were high attainers expected to apply to Russell Group universities. Her PowerPoint was one she had created herself since Hallingford did not provide form tutors with resources for the UCAS day.

When I arrived to observe the second form group, the form tutor was working on his laptop and none of the students, except for a group of three girls, appeared to be making any attempt to set up their UCAS accounts. Left to their own devices, students surfed the internet or chatted. I learnt from students that they had been given a short talk on how to set up their UCAS accounts before my arrival. Some students wanted help with their UCAS applications and some asked about my research. One boy wanted to know what King's 'was like' for certain subjects, and if I would recommend it. Others questioned me about other London universities. I appeared to represent the only chance of 'hot' knowledge for most of these students. I learnt that the form group I was observing comprised students studying a mixture of A levels, Applied A levels and BTECs. All aspired to university. One boy told me he wanted to apply to Oxford. On questioning, it turned out he meant Oxford Brooks. No-one had university educated parents but some had siblings at 'new' London universities and one had a brother at UCL. At one point, I glanced around to check if the form tutor gave any sign of minding the informal HE support session taking place.

However, he appeared oblivious to it. By the end of the afternoon, little had been produced by any of these students.

St John's

I observed two UCAS days at St John. The first I observed was during a preliminary visit to the school and during which I gave a presentation on writing a personal statement. There was also a talk given by a representative from a non-Russell Group university. This was listed as a presentation on choosing a degree; however, the representative used the opportunity to advertise the benefits of her own institution. A PowerPoint showed shots of the university's gym and bedrooms with en suite bathrooms. I observed some students looking at each other in surprise. Whispered comments revealed that this was not the type of information they were expecting. The second half of the morning was spent in workshops on subjects such as budgeting on a student loan and personal statement writing. In the afternoon, eight students selected for Oxbridge were separated from the rest of the school and were given a talk on applying to Oxbridge.⁵⁵ The rest of Year 12 were divided between two large computer rooms where they were instructed to set up their UCAS accounts. I walked around the room and chatted to students. Some used the opportunity to ask for help. Two students admitted they were uncertain about university but had been told they 'had to' set up a UCAS account.

I also observed a workshop given by a private company which specialised in placing young people in local apprenticeships. Nine students signed up for the workshop. After a short introduction about what apprenticeships entailed, the speaker handed around a list of apprenticeships he was 'currently looking to fill'. Most of these appeared to be office junior positions. There was one apprenticeship in a warehouse at the local trading estate. A group of boys sniggered when a boy asked about apprenticeships in joinery. Later, I met Head of Sixth Form, Mrs Jay, and she told me apprenticeships were associated with 'getting your hands dirty' by the majority of aspirant parents who sent their children to St John's. Mrs Jay said that 'even when it's not in a student's best interests', parents wanted them to go to university.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ I discuss St John's Oxbridge Group tutorials in Chapters 6.

⁵⁶ The following year, the apprenticeship workshop was given by an FE college (see Chapter 7).

Parklands

As with Hallingford and St John's, Parklands' annual UCAS preparation takes place at the end of year 12. Organised by Head of Careers, Mrs Pearson, and Head of Sixth Form, Mrs Dawson, the day opened with a talk given by a Cambridge admissions tutor. The emphasis of the talk was on writing an appropriate personal statement for Oxbridge. Mrs Pearson and Mrs Dawson both explained that the school felt the talk was appropriate for all Parklands boys since the vast majority apply to Russell Group universities. Talks given by Oxbridge admissions tutors on the Oxbridge admissions tests and the Oxbridge interview were optional. During the afternoon, boys chose one of the presentations given by Parklands' team of 18 subject specialists advising boys on the writing of subject-specific personal statements. I observed a personal statement workshop for students intending to apply for Law given by English teacher and Cambridge graduate, Mr Gabriel. Mr Gabriel had also practised at the bar before becoming a teacher. His extensive PowerPoint presentation outlined different approaches to structuring a personal statement, gave titles for recommended reading, and recommended Law Reviews and other online resources. Students were also given examples of well and poorly written personal statements and encouraged to critically examine them. In the final part of the session, students presented research topics about which they would write for the Parklands Extended Project (PEP), and/or in their personal statement.⁵⁷

Getting kids into 'uni' – 'Who's it all for?'

The majority of Hallingford and St John's moderately attaining sixth formers aspired to university. Nonetheless, many expressed opinions which made clear their belief that schools encouraged progression to university for their own (institutional) ends, and that this had little to do with what was best for students. By way of drawing this chapter on selective practices to a close, I present some of the opinions expressed by moderate attainers, one high attainer and one teacher, about why schools 'pushed' university. These observations throw light on the selective practices employed by

⁵⁷ PEP - Parklands' 'in house' Extended Qualification Project (EPQ). See Appendix B for more on the EPQ, an optional Level 3 qualification for which students carry out a research-based project and for which UCAS points are awarded.

Hallingford and St John's as part of their provision of support for students' UCAS applications, discussed in Chapters 5 and 6.

Some students, such as Hallingford's Adela and Stacey, believed wanting to 'get kids into uni' was something their school shared with all schools:

...this school wants us all to go [to university]. All schools want to get kids into uni. It's because - well, it's not for us...I feel like it's for them...I think it makes the school look good.

(Stacey, Hallingford)

...sometimes you can see where their intentions lie - they just wanna get the best grades to get kids into uni...that's like every other school in London. It looks good for them, and they want to draw kids in, but at the same time we're not lab animals.

(Adela, Hallingford)

Neena and Zane felt the pressure of going to university, and particularly a Russell Group university, from the constant reminders in the literature which adorned Hallingford's sixth form block:

They care a great deal about numbers getting to university. You see it from the signs around here: 'This person got into this university, with these grades and studying this degree', sort of thing. It's like all these people went to university with these all good grades. It's what it's all about, here [...//] It's something like self-advertisement, if you know what I mean...It's like some kind of university campaign.

(Zane, Hallingford)

Obviously, it's all about the Russell Group and Oxbridge kids around here and how they achieved and things...I mean it's all around the sixth form and who's achieved what...the charts and photos and stuff and what they've achieved, it's all around you. Sometimes (*pause*) I wonder...like, you know, *who's it all for?*

(Neena, Hallingford)

At St John's, both moderate and high attainers appeared to understand the importance of 'results' for attracting future students, and especially high attaining students. All appeared to have absorbed the importance of a school achieving a competitive edge over other schools.

The thing is, they're very results driven [at St John's]. They care about the results you get more than anything else, really, and they want you to get good A levels and go to Oxbridge and all that because it looks good...and other people will come here and do A levels. It's all about the numbers...

(Erica, St John's)

I think the Heads and Deputy Heads are quite set on academic performance ...you know, and having more publicity which says, 'We've got the best students and they're off to Oxford and Cambridge.'

(Zoe, St John's)

[St John's] likes students who get all the As and A*s and go to the 'top' unis. It means we go up in the rankings, and that means more people want to come here and then the school gets more money and things. [.../] I'm not sure how it works exactly, but it's kind of, 'You get better grades and go to better unis if you come here' sort of thing, rather than other schools in the area.

(Benny, St John's)

I guess it always sounds attractive to someone on the outside if they hear, 'Oh, four people went to Oxford and Cambridge' because that's why I came to [St John's]. At [previous school] two people got invited for interview and here six people got interviews. That just plainly says you go here because it's better, you get a better chance. And then the school thinks, 'If we can get a bigger draw of people, then we're more likely to get a top student who will go on to do Oxbridge'. It's the cycle. If you're not focusing on those people, and kids end up in universities that aren't the best they could achieve, then the school hasn't got the same draw.

(Judith, St John's)

Many students at both Hallingford and St John's showed a sophisticated awareness of the competitive pressure for schools to steer students towards HE. They understood also that high attainers' progression to 'elite' universities represented essential 'publicity' for their schools. One Hallingford form tutor expressed his distaste for the 'push':

I normally would not say negative things about colleagues...but...yes...I- I- ...and I don't think I'm alone...I really *detest* the way certain members of senior staff here try to push our kids, not because- (*stops himself*) but...(long pause) it's in the interests of the school...

(Mr Riley, Hallingford)

Hallingford form tutor, Mr Riley, was the only teacher to express an opinion which revealed a belief that Hallingford's focus on high attainers and access to Russell Group universities was motivated primarily by the interests of the school and, by implication, not those of students. However, he implied he was not the only teacher to feel unease with Hallingford's HE discourse. In addition, these Hallingford and St John's students – and all but Judith are moderate attainers - saw their schools' practices as being inextricably bound up with the focus on progression to HE, and to 'elite' universities in particular.

Concluding thoughts

The types of selection examined in this chapter include formal selective practices and unofficial types of selection which were effected through differentiation of resources and discrimination. Formal selection may be seen in the entry requirements for a school sixth form and for different subject choices. At Hallingford, there was also the formal sorting of students into an 'unofficial' hierarchy of tutor groups. My observation of two tutor groups during Hallingford's UCAS day made clear how resources and teacher expertise were differentiated for differently attaining groups. At St John's, the separation of eight Oxbridge students from the rest of year 12 during the afternoon of their UCAS day was a similar example of a formal selective practice.

Selective practices relating to subject choices saw some moderate attainers 'cooled out' of subjects. Some subjects appeared to have entry requirements which were

never made clear to moderate attainers, were arbitrary, or which may have been applied retrospectively. Although senior teachers in both Hallingford and St John's insisted all students were interviewed in year 11, no moderate attainer could recall discussing their subject choices with a teacher in a way that was constructive. Any discussions about subject choices were described as negative experiences. Moderate attainers gave examples of being actively discouraged from taking a subject, feeling pressurised into taking a subject and/or taking a subject because it was the only option that would fit their timetables. Conversely, high attainers reported year 11 experiences of being 'warmed up' by teachers wanting them to study their subject at A level. Further, Hallingford and Parkland teachers admitted to inter-departmental rivalry for high attainers to boost departmental grade averages. It is possible that St John's Amy was denied the opportunity to study Maths and Hallingford's Zane from taking A level Business in order to protect grade averages. If Neena's belief about attempts to exclude her from [Subject C] are accurate, this would suggest a particularly aggressive example of a moderately attaining student being 'cooled out' of a subject choice in order to boost grade averages. In a market system where teachers are held accountable for students' grades it is perhaps not surprising that such practices may be employed by some teachers.⁵⁸

More wounding and more prevalent were the myriad of informal or unrecognised types of selection which impacted on moderate attainers' experiences in the classroom. Arguably, wherever one group of attainers is systematically treated in an appreciably different way from another, a selective practice is in play, especially when the practice is detrimental to one group's learning and/or their learning experiences. Many of Hallingford and St John's moderate attainers described teacher conduct towards them which they experienced as discriminatory. Several students shared experiences of the classroom which included being overlooked in favour of high attainers, being the victim of sexist humour and/or of being 'picked on' or belittled in class. Moderate attainers in both schools were more likely to have had at least one teacher who was inexperienced and/or long-term absent. Moderate attainers were also more likely to have had more than one substitute teacher during the

⁵⁸ For example, an Ofsted report states that teachers should be 'held rigorously to account for the achievement of their students' (Ofsted report for Greater London school, 2013).

academic year. The allocation of teachers was a way in which schools appeared to differentiate resources for differently attaining groups. The practice appeared to have disadvantaged some moderate attainers: students of AS levels [Subject A] at St John's and [Subject B] at Hallingford all attained poorly.

As Chapters 5 and 6 will make clear, Hallingford and St John's year 12 UCAS days were the only form of guaranteed, formal support for the HE process given to moderate attainers in these schools. The disparity in the types and level of support for different attainment groups for students' HE choosing, discussed in Chapter 5, and for their UCAS applications, discussed in Chapter 6, may be seen as a 'natural', or inevitable, extension of the selective practices described in this chapter.

CHAPTER 5

Differentiated support for HE choosing

‘There’s a lot of kids who see that it’s either a Russell Group university or failure’

(Mr Derbyshire, Hallingford)

Introduction

The aim of this chapter and Chapter 6 is to examine the ways in which formal and informal selective sixth form practices result in differentiated levels of support throughout the process of choosing and applying to HE. In this chapter, I focus on the help provided for students’ HE choosing; in Chapter 6, I focus on support given for students’ UCAS applications, and specifically the drafting of the personal statement. During my analysis of interviews, a typology of students’ responses to the HE discourses of their schools emerged.⁵⁹ Where useful, in this chapter and in Chapters 6 and 7, I explain students’ responses using some of the types that feature in my typology.

I start this chapter by examining the HE discourse at Hallingford and St John’s. Using high and moderate attainers’ accounts, I show how support for HE choosing was differentiated for differently attaining groups in both schools and students’ responses to the support they received. I then offer some insights into Hallingford and St John’s form tutors’ perspectives on the HE discourse operating within their schools, and in particular the focus on Russell Group applicants. I discuss Hallingford and St John’s moderate attainers’ reliance on ‘luke warm’ knowledge, in the absence of support for their HE choosing. I conclude with a brief discussion of the enhanced levels of support provided at fee-paying Parklands and an explanation of the school’s dedicated university applications team.

⁵⁹ See Chapter 3, Table 9, for my typology of student responses.

The HE discourse at Hallingford

Sixth form displays

Hallingford takes pride in being a comprehensive school in a socially disadvantaged area from which around 48% of year 13 students annually progress to university. It is especially proud of the students who progress to Russell Group universities which, at the time of my research, was around 26% of the entire year 13 cohort.⁶⁰ Several students and form tutors, described the ‘push’ to go to university. The physical evidence of Hallingford’s HE discourse could be found throughout the top floor of the sixth form block. In the sixth form common room, the walls were lined with noticeboards with information about UCAS deadlines, university degree courses and open days. University prospectuses filled a display area. Noticeboards in the main corridor celebrated past Oxbridge and Russell Group successes, complete with photographs of students and their A level grades. Since researching for my Masters, a noticeboard celebrating 'Vocational Achievement' had been added. This contained photographs of Hallingford’s highest attaining BTEC students, their grades, and the universities to which they had progressed. All the institutions listed were part of the ‘Sutton 30’.⁶¹ There was also a board listing every member of teaching staff and the universities they had attended, of which a substantial proportion were Russell Group. Hallingford’s Head of Sixth Form, Mr Nelson, told me that his noticeboards encouraged ‘aspiration’. As with many teachers in Hallingford and St John’s, Mr Nelson’s use of ‘aspiration’ was synonymous with progression to university.

The Higher Education Fair

In addition to sixth form displays, the strong focus on progression to university was evident from Hallingford’s annual HE Fair. In contrast to a Higher Apprenticeship Fair reserved for BTEC students, attendance at the HE Fair was compulsory for all year 12 students, with the Head of Sixth Form, Mr Nelson, his deputy, Mr Wilson, and three members of the sixth form support team on hand to take a register.⁶² At the HE Fair I observed, some students registered and after walking briefly around the

⁶⁰ Figures are for the time of my research, 2014-7.

⁶¹ The Sutton 30 comprises the most selective Russell Group and non-Russell Group universities. (See Appendix A).

⁶² Hallingford’s Higher Apprenticeship Fair is discussed in Chapter 7.

hall attempted to leave, only to be stopped by Mr Nelson and quizzed on which university stalls they had visited and whether they had spoken to any admissions tutors. I counted 25 higher education institutions stalls attended by admissions staff and/or student ambassadors to talk to students. Student ambassadors could be overheard outlining the attractions of their university to would-be applications. Enticements included lower grade offers for students living within a certain radius of the campus, and/or bursaries for students with a recognisable (sporting or music) talent, and the potential to contribute to the 'life' of the university. The event included representatives from Oxford and Cambridge as well as several of London's most selective universities. In addition, there were representatives from Queen Mary's and Royal Holloway, as well as Brunel and a selection of less selective, post-1992 'new' universities.⁶³ Two FE colleges also attended. Staff from the FE colleges confirmed that there had been minimal interest from students. One representative said I had been the only person to speak to him all morning. Hallingford does not host a careers event for sixth formers. The strength of the HE discourse would appear to be demonstrated by a lack of support for students who seek alternatives to HE, this is in spite of a substantial number of lower attainers studying for BTECs at the school.

Support for UCAS applications

Parklands was the only school with a formal policy on the provision of HE support. This is set out in the school's 112-page HE manual containing advice and information on HE choosing and making a UCAS application, a list of key dates, and contact details of the school's 18 subject specialists. In line with general informality of the provision of support for students HE and non-HE choosing, I found no formal written policy on the provision of HE advice at Hallingford and St John's.

Other than Hallingford's annual year 12 UCAS day, no time is officially allocated for the completion of UCAS applications for students not applying to Oxbridge. Sixth form tutor groups are large, comprising an average of 25 year 12s and 25 year

⁶³ Hallingford's location on the outskirts of Greater London, coupled with a student population which, for cultural and/or economic reasons, means students prefer to live at home during their studies, meant that London HEIs were in high demand and dominated the HE Fair. See Appendix A for more on types of universities.

13s, with different year groups meeting on different days of the week. In year 13, students meet twice weekly for form periods of 20 minutes. Form periods may be used, at the form tutor's discretion, to discuss issues related to university applications and/or to allow students time to work on their personal statements. The types of support students receive for the completion of their UCAS application depends on the time available during this form period (also used for school announcements and other notices) and the form tutor's availability to see students outside form periods. Interviews with moderately attaining year 13 students at the end of the autumn term indicated they had all had one meeting with their form tutor.

Oxbridge – 'cherry picking' and 'grooming'

Hallingford is in competition with a local academy which selects for its sixth form. In an attempt to remain competitive, and just as Reay et al (2005) found, a disproportionate investment of human and economic resources was invested in students selected for Oxbridge. Time allocated for Oxbridge preparation was informally arranged and generously given. A small team of senior teachers were responsible for Oxbridge applications. However, the existence of the team was not officially acknowledged. High attainers and some moderate attainers, such as Mahnoor and Naz, named senior teachers who they believed were reserved for Oxbridge applicants. The lack of formally timetabled support for students' UCAS applications belied the extent to which 'informal cultures of advice' (Oliver and Kettley, 2010) characterised the support given to Oxbridge applicants, and especially the amount of time given to Oxbridge applicants by Mr Nelson and the Oxbridge team.

Students who entered Hallingford's sixth form with five or more A*s at GCSE were selected by Mr Nelson as potential Oxbridge applicants and allocated to 'top' form groups.⁶⁴ High attaining sixth formers described assemblies early in year 13 where announcements were made inviting potential Oxbridge applicants to attend specially convened meetings. If high attainers did not self-select, Mr Nelson actively sought them out and suggested, sometimes quite forcefully, that they *should* be attending these meetings. High attainer, Kirti, said Oxbridge meetings were 'random', meaning

⁶⁴ See Chapter 4, Table 19, for Hallingford's hierarchy of form groups.

there was no formal timetable, and that meetings tended to be ‘chats’ giving advice on the Oxbridge application process. Sixth form tutor, Mr Derbyshire, said that up to fifty per cent of his ‘top’ form group might apply for Oxbridge in a given year. Interviews with six, high attaining students revealed that three felt they had been persuaded to apply to Oxford by Mr Nelson; none of the three were successful. All high attainers who took part in my research benefited from courses run by The Sutton Trust. Designed to enhance their applications to prestigious (highly selective) Russell Group universities, students who attended summer schools and ‘Pathways’ courses automatically received reduced offers by host universities, provided they selected the university as their ‘first choice’ on their UCAS applications.⁶⁵ However, high attainer Kirti believed she received a reduced offer (ABB) from UCL, in spite of UCL being her second choice, chosen after her rejection from Oxbridge. Kirti and Fahima enjoyed their summer school at UCL, whilst Sumeer found his Pathways to Law course at LSE uninspiring. He attended every Saturday because his travel was paid for and he was allowed to use the university library ‘for free’.

In addition to what form tutors, Mr Derbyshire and Mr Riley, called the ‘grooming’ of Oxbridge applicants by Mr Nelson and the Oxbridge team, a private company was employed to mentor Oxbridge applications. There was also a ‘Supper Society’ designed to give Hallingford's Oxbridge applicants the opportunity to mix with those from ‘Sydney's’, a local independent school. Neither Mr Nelson nor his deputy, Mr Windsor, were willing to discuss the cost of the ‘Supper Society’. Mr Windsor would only say that the number of dinners held annually was being reduced. In addition, the sixth form secretary told me that the private company which coached Oxbridge applicants was not used as extensively as when I had researched Hallingford sixth form for my Master's. The importance to Mr Nelson of students' Oxbridge applications suggested that such cuts would have been made reluctantly, and this pointed to a squeeze on sixth form spending (see Martin, 2017). In each of the three years prior to my research, three to four Hallingford students had gained places at Oxbridge out of a year 13 of roughly 270. Two Oxbridge offers were made in the final year of my research in Hallingford. This was in spite of a record number of 15 students being called for interview. Mr Nelson's disappointment was expressed

⁶⁵ See Appendix N for details of a Sutton Trust ‘Pathways’ course.

in strong, angry terms, and was further exacerbated by the fact that both students in receipt of offers from Oxford turned them down in favour of offers from Harvard and the LSE.

Differentiated support – student observations

Interviews with both moderately and high attaining year 13 Hallingford students revealed a far greater investment of time being given to the UCAS applications of high attaining students. Confusion arose among students and staff because Mr Nelson also chose to help selected moderate attainers with their UCAS applications, although these tended to be higher end moderate attainers applying to Russell Group universities. Other moderate attainers who sought help from Mr Nelson reported being told by him that he was 'too busy'.

Sumeer's conversion to thinking of himself as a potential Oxbridge candidate came only two weeks before the Oxbridge deadline. A high attaining, working-class Hindu boy with an older brother at a 'new' university, Sumeer described 'a heavy two-hour meeting' with Mr Nelson and sixth form tutor, Miss Williams, during which he was persuaded to apply for Oxford. In spite of Oxford not offering single honours Politics, which Sumeer wanted to study, Sumeer agreed to re-write his personal statement to 'make it more for History'. Mr Nelson and Miss Williams personally oversaw several drafts of Sumeer's personal statement. Sumeer described an easy and familiar relationship with Mr Nelson. In year 12, Mr Nelson had arranged for Sumeer, who had ambitions to be a journalist, to carry out work experience with a personal contact who worked with a leading media company. Sumeer said he could 'drop in' on Mr Nelson whenever he needed help. I asked Sumeer if he thought Mr Nelson helped less high attaining students in the same way. Sumeer explained,

He does, but not as much. I don't think he's that dedicated. He's dedicated to the Russell Group, Oxbridge (...//) Maybe he can relate to them more. Maybe it's something like he cares about them more. I don't know. I don't want to bitch but...I think maybe he can relate to them more; plus, to be fair, those who are low down the school, they do have help from someone called Helen. (*Laughs, embarrassed*) Sorry, that sounds wrong...it sounds like I'm belittling them, [calling lower attainers] 'low down', but Helen's more there for them.

Mr Nelson is more for the A* star kids. The others, they don't have as much help. They definitely don't. [When there's] opportunities, like stuff advertised that you can do, like the Sutton Trust, it's only for the A* kids. ⁶⁶

Sumeer's observation of the type of students with whom Mr Nelson could 'relate' suggested he recognised a possible influence of Mr Nelson's teacher habitus on the head of sixth form's 'proactivity' (Oliver and Kettley, 2010) in relation to the university applications of particular students. To Sumeer, Mr Nelson's habitus helped him to relate better to students applying to 'elite' universities. Oliver and Kettley's (2010) study of the influence of teacher habitus focuses on students' applications to 'elite' universities and does not include moderately attaining HE applicants. However, Mr Nelson's 'proactivity' with some groups more than others, as described by Sumeer and other students cited below, suggested Mr Nelson might have been drawn to students whose habituses were a closer 'fit' to his own. Reay et al (2005) find that a 'fit' between the institutional and familial habitus facilitates a student's HE choosing. At Hallingford, three high attainers' accounts gave the strong impression that it was Mr Nelson's teacher habitus, rather than Hallingford's institutional habitus more generally, which facilitated their progress through the HE process. In spite of their working-class backgrounds, as Oxbridge applicants, these students' HE aspirations were in 'synergy' (Reay et al, 2005, p.79) with Mr Nelson's aspirations for his sixth form.

Sumeer's best friend was Fahima, a high attaining Muslim girl who Mr Nelson had encouraged to apply for Oxford. Sumeer explained how he understood Mr Nelson chose whom he helped with their university applications:

Mr Nelson personally likes me whereas for others, like Fahima, he doesn't actually teach her. So, with him and her it would be an 'elitist' thing [...//]
With Fahima, he solely knows her on her grades...and so she gets the help.

(Sumeer, Hallingford)

⁶⁶ Helen – member of sixth form support team responsible for BTEC students

Asmit, a working-class Hindu and Oxbridge applicant, described his relationship with Mr Nelson in similar terms to Sumeer. Asmit smiled and told me, '[Mr Nelson] really likes me, Miss', adding,

We get on really well. I get a lot of help. Like, I was chosen for this SEO course and he told me about Pathways. I don't think everyone gets that, he doesn't tell everyone. I got work experience with these top lawyers and now I've got contacts there...it's nice to have, yeah (*smiling*).⁶⁷

(Asmit, Hallingford)

Unlike Asmit and Sumeer, Fahima did not profess to have any kind of 'friendship' with Mr Nelson. However, as an Oxbridge applicant, she described receiving 'a lot' of help with her personal statement and a 'really good' reference from Mr Nelson. Although grateful, Fahima was critical of Mr Nelson's focus on high attainers. She also admitted to feeling 'pushed' by Mr Nelson's persistent approaches to apply to Oxford and described feeling uncomfortable while on interview at Oxford. She had been one of only three BAME students out of 50 applicants, and could not see how she would 'fit' as a traditionally dressed, young Muslim woman. In the middle of talking about her reluctance to apply to Oxford, Fahima suddenly broke off and said, 'Do you know what, Miss? I think [Mr Nelson] is elitist'. When I asked Fahima to explain why she felt this, she said she believed Mr Nelson's preference for Oxbridge students was 'elitist', echoing Sumeer's feeling that Mr Nelson's preference for high attainers was an 'elitist thing'. Moderate attainer, Mahnoor, also used the term 'elitist' in relation to Mr Nelson, describing his selection of students to help with their personal statements as 'elitist'. Oliver and Kettley argue 'teachers' histories, prior experiences, moral and political beliefs' shape their 'proactivity' in supporting applications to 'elite' universities (Oliver and Kettley, 2010, p.739). These Hallingford students' use of the word 'elitist' also echoed language used by St John's sixth form tutor, Mrs Barker, when commenting on her school's proactivity in relation to high attaining students and their HE aspirations:

⁶⁷ SEO – Sponsors for Educational Opportunity. An organisation 'which prepares talented students from ethnic minority or low socioeconomic backgrounds for career success' (<http://www.seo-london.org/>).

I feel like there's...Can I say 'elitism', that goes on here in relation to kids going to 'top' unis? Can I say that? Because it's almost as if all those ones that are incredibly bright have more fed into them. The others are just left.

(Mrs Barker, St John's)

The use of 'elitism' in all cases was used when interviewees wanted to stress the inherent *wrong* in selecting high attainers for preferential treatment. Hallingford high attainers, Asmit, Fahima, Kirti and Sumeer, were all aware that they were given enhanced support in the HE process owing to their status as Oxbridge applicants. Although grateful they felt the distribution of resources was unfair. In an effort to redistribute, or 'pass on' the support they received, Asmit, Fahima and Kirit helped moderately attaining friends with their personal statements.⁶⁸

Differentiated support and 'friendship'

Some Hallingford students who did not qualify as high attainers were given support by Mr Nelson. It seemed possible that there was a better 'fit' between Mr Nelson's middle-class habitus and the familial habitus of these moderate attainers. As Sumeer observed of Mr Nelson, he appeared to relate 'more' to certain types of students. Moderate attainer Tim, told me he had 'underperformed' in his AS levels and had been encouraged by Mr Nelson to repeat year 12. He attained his predicted two As and two Bs on his second attempt, and applied to King's College London to read History. Tim told me Mr Nelson had been 'a real friend' and 'really supportive' throughout his sixth form, and especially with his UCAS application. When I asked Tim if he thought all students got the same kind of help, Tim responded cagily, stating, 'Mr Nelson is a busy guy – he can't help everyone.' I explained that some students felt Mr Nelson had more time for some students' university applications than others. Tim agreed that Mr Nelson was

probably more helpful with people going to higher, top end unis...I guess he's more helpful because he has worked a lot with those unis; he knows more about the top end.

(Tim, Hallingford)

⁶⁸ The help high attaining student gave moderate attaining friends is discussed in Chapter 6.

Tim lived with his sister, a university student, in a house his mother owned. His mother lived with her boyfriend in another part of London. Mahnoor, a working class, Muslim girl sensed that Tim's complex living arrangements belied his social status. She explained:

Tim speaks more poshly than the rest of us. Teachers speak to kids like Tim...He's not super-bright but he's nice...he's gets on with everybody. I can probably count on one hand the times Mr Nelson has spoken to me...he wouldn't come up to me, you know, openly, and approach a kid like me and chat, like he does with Tim. Teachers don't rate kids like me. In Maths, if I was on a table and Tim was there too, [Mr Derbyshire] would talk to Tim or Tim would talk to him, but [Mr Derbyshire] wouldn't choose to speak to me.

(Mahnoor, Hallingford)

Mahnoor appeared to recognise that Tim's habitus chimed more closely with the habitus of middle-class teachers than her own. In a similar way to Tim, moderate attainer Karim believed Mr Nelson was 'a friend'. My interviews with Karim, an Afghan Muslim, revealed that although his parents now worked in unskilled jobs, his father had read Pharmacy at an Afghan university. He described his family 'as refugees from the War'. Karim attained a mixture of Bs and Cs at GCSE. Karim's courtesy and gallantry made him popular with members of staff. Mr Nelson described Karim as 'an exceptional young man'. A member of the sixth form support staff described Karim as, 'What you'd call charming'. Echoing comments made by Asmit, Sumeer and Tim, Karim believed Mr Nelson *liked him*. Karim was applying to Westminster and described being 'helped a lot' by Mr Nelson with his UCAS application. When we talked about students who felt Mr Nelson did not have time for them, Karim pronounced, echoing Tim's words, 'Mr Nelson is a very busy person - he helps those who help themselves, Miss'.

Karim, Tim, Asmit and Sumeer represented a wide range of academic attainment and all described their relationship with Mr Nelson in terms of friendship. The confidence with which they talked about their relations with Mr Nelson pointed to a 'fit' of habituses which was instinctive and cultural, and quite apart from any differences in ethnicity and/or socio-economic backgrounds. Karim was the only

moderate attainer applying to a non-Russell Group university at either Hallingford or St John's to receive a level of support which equalled that of high attaining students applying to 'elite' universities.

Support for 'averagey' HE choices

Mahnoor's observations about Tim coupled with Tim and Karim's accounts of their relationship with Mr Nelson suggested differentiated levels of support for reasons that sometimes went beyond the type of university aspired to. Moderate attainer Adela's experiences of Mr Nelson's support when completing her UCAS application were more typical of the kind of problems moderate attainers described facing at Hallingford. Adela, a working-class Black girl who lived with her mother, sister and grandmother, told me that she 'under-performed' at AS level. She gained BDEE instead of the two As and two Bs she had been predicted. Since her predictions were identical to Tim's, I asked if anyone had suggested she retook year 12. Adela appeared puzzled by the question and said 'No, no-one'. Adela was predicted ACC for her A levels. She dreamed of applying for medicine but after talking to her form tutor, Mr Riley, decided to apply for Psychology. She then sought Mr Nelson's advice on her five university choices. Adela explained that she wanted to include East Anglia, with Bristol as her 'aspirational' choice. However, when she went to see Mr Nelson to discuss her UCAS application, she felt dismissed:

He told me to put in unis that are just like averagey...like, not the ones you want to go to, but just average unis, and then just wait and go through Clearing.

(Adela, Hallingford)⁶⁹

By 'averagey', Adela told me she believed Mr Nelson meant 'rubbish places', and she was clearly hurt by Mr Nelson's estimation of her. She wanted to try for Bristol and argued with Mr Nelson but he had been insistent:

⁶⁹ 'Clearing' See Appendix D.

He was like, 'No, they're definitely not going to accept you so there's no point...and they're going to come back to me and ask me, *Why did you recommend this student to apply to us?* - that kind of thing. So, I thought o.k., fine (*hurt*)... so I put down three universities which I didn't really want to go to.

(Adela, Hallingford)

Adela's resignation to choosing 'average' universities was an unhappy one. She was aggrieved, but also appeared cowed by Mr Nelson and his improbable reasons for rejecting her HE choices. Oliver and Kettley (2010) note the 'unique position' of teachers to challenge 'restricting self-beliefs' of 'highly able' students; they point out that the 'proactive behaviours of individual teachers can be decisive factors in whether or not disadvantaged students apply to 'elite' universities' (Oliver and Kettley. 2010, p.739). Equally, this may be said of the role of teachers as agents in moderate attainers' HE aspirations. Mr Nelson's influence over this sixth form had the potential to both encourage and disincentivise students' aspirations. Adela appeared to become demotivated in year 13, and I wondered if she would eventually progress to HE. Although it was a risky approach to HE choice-making, Mr Nelson's advice turned out to be right. When Adela did not attain her predicted A level grades, she found a university place to study Psychology through Clearing.

Adela was not the only moderate attainer who felt a lack of support from Mr Nelson. As working-class moderate attainer Zane pointed out to me, students only had to look around their sixth form noticeboards to learn that access to Russell Group universities was what Hallingford's sixth form 'was all about' (Zane). The lack of time invested in students applying to 'new' universities compounded feelings that such HEIs were deemed 'second rate' (Zane). Zane was philosophical about the difficulties he experienced in getting Mr Nelson to check his personal statement for his application to study Sonic Arts (see Chapter 6). Nonetheless, when making his HE choices, Zane's social capital helped him to be an 'independent chooser'. His strategy was to turn to his musician friends with 'hot' knowledge about the music industry who advised him on degree courses in music technology. Zane pointed out, laughingly, 'Quite honestly, [Mr Nelson] wouldn't have a clue!' Although Mr Nelson was needed for the final check of his personal statement, Zane understood

that Mr Nelson's cultural and social capital was of the wrong type to be of use to him when choosing his degree course. Zane's HE choosing was a rare example of a working-class student with types of cultural and social capital which meant he was not as reliant on Mr Nelson in the HE process as some students. In this way, Zane was largely able to circumnavigate Mr Nelson's influence as either facilitator or gatekeeper (Oliver and Kettley, 2010) in the HE process and successfully progressed to Brunel, a university Zane's musician friends said was 'a really good place for studying the techy side of music'.⁷⁰

Gatekeepers or facilitators - the influence of teacher habitus

Just as it seemed Mr Nelson acted as gatekeeper for some students' HE applications, there were some Hallingford teachers in possession of particular type of teacher habitus which made them facilitators for students' post-school choosing. Bourdieu explains habitus as

a system of dispositions, that is of permanent manners of being, seeing, acting and thinking, or a system of long-lasting (rather than permanent) schemes or structures of perception, conception and action.

(Bourdieu, 2002, p.27)

Teachers with certain dispositions, coupled with practical skills and in possession of relevant cultural and social capital, were seen to be especially supportive of moderately attaining HE applicants. A small number of Hallingford moderate attainers described being given personalised support with their UCAS applications by form tutors Mr Riley and Mr Douglas, and senior teacher, Mr Austen. All three teachers emerged as facilitators for moderate attainers' HE applications. Importantly, they possessed an ethical disposition which inclined them to a more socially just distribution of support for the HE process. Students' descriptions of the support they were given highlighted the importance of a teacher habitus characterised by *kindness* (see Rowland, 2009). Adela described Mr Riley as 'kind', because he was 'willing to

⁷⁰ See Chapter 7, Tables 18, 19, and 20, for students' responses to the HE discourse of their schools and their HE destinations.

sit down with you'. Similarly, Mahnoor said senior teacher Mr Austen had sat with her. She explained,

[Mr Austen] doesn't put you down or anything. When I took my UCAS to him, he read it. I mean, he really did read right through it. He was like, 'O, you applied there' and stuff. I'd say [Mr Austen] is one of our kindest teachers.

(Mahnoor, Hallingford)

Naz's appreciation of Mr Austen and Mr Douglas was based on the generosity of their help and especially since it contrasted so strongly with the type of support given to him by his form tutor. Naz told me Mr Austen helped him 'big time' with his personal statement. In addition, he spoke of Mr Douglas's kindness to him when he found Naz work experience.⁷¹

Adela was the only moderate attainer amongst all those I interviewed at Hallingford and St John's who received constructive help with both her HE choosing and the writing of her personal statement from a form tutor, Mr Riley. Mr Riley's previous career as a research scientist and experience of working in the field of Higher Education meant he was in possession of specialised cultural capital, which was particularly helpful to supporting would-be doctor, Adela. In addition to his specialised academic knowledge, Mr Riley's habitus included the political and ethical dispositions (Oliver and Kettley, 2010) which meant he was willing to question Hallingford's 'push' towards Russell Group universities. Adela described a long lunchtime meeting with Mr Riley during which he gave her the necessary 'wake-up call' (Adela) about studying for medicine after attaining BDEE at AS level, with Es in Biology and Chemistry. Mr Riley's tact encouraged Adela to consider alternatives to HE as well as a 'more realistic' (Adela) degree course. On questioning Adela about her meeting, it became clear that Mr Riley made a degree in Psychology *possible* for her by presenting it as a positive choice. He pointed out to Adela that she attained consistently well in Psychology. It was with pride that Adela told me it was 'obvious' to Mr Riley that she was 'good' at Psychology. Having had her confidence restored by facilitator Mr Riley, Adela then came up against Mr Nelson's

⁷¹ Support given to Naz by Mr Austen is discussed in Chapter 6 and by Mr Douglas in Chapter 7.

gatekeeping teacher habitus. As I describe above, Adela's desire for Mr Nelson's approval of her HE choices was met with rejection. His explanation that Adela's aspirational university choices risked causing him embarrassment was plausible for Adela. She believed Mr Nelson's claim for the very reasons she had sought his approval explaining, '[Mr Nelson] knows the smart thing to do when applying to uni'. It seemed that Adela's faith in Mr Nelson's expertise meant she doubted alternative sources of information.

I sought out sixth form tutor, Mr Douglas, after hearing about him from moderate attainers Dale, Naz and Mahnoor. Students' accounts indicated that Mr Douglas was unique at Hallingford in using his social networks to generate opportunities for moderate attainers whether they aspired to HE or sought an apprenticeship. Part of Mr Douglas' social networking included making contact with another school whose student population was closer to the 'type of kids' (Mr Douglas) who comprised his form group of students studying for BTECs and Applied A levels. Together, Mr Douglas and the school's Head of Sixth Form had compiled a list of university courses for which students with Applied A levels and BTECs were eligible. Mr Douglas explained,

I showed my Applied Science kids a PowerPoint with all the universities and the sorts of courses they offer that take Applied Sciences. Now, that really motivated a lot of them [...//] Over the past two years, my students have gone on to all sorts of universities and apprenticeships schemes...all sorts of things. If they're not motivated, they *can't work (urgently)*.

(Mr Douglas, Hallingford)

Mr Douglas believed if 'motivated', moderately attaining students taking Applied A levels and BTECs could be helped to aspire to a range of universities. Some of his former students had accessed universities such as Cardiff, King's and Surrey:

I've started to get kids in university, who I used to teach or who were in my form group, to come in and give talks to my current form group. I've had six kids who've come in; now, that's really inspired them. [...//] We have to dismantle the nonsense we have here that if you don't go to Oxbridge you're not any good.

(Mr Douglas, Hallingford)

Mr Douglas appeared willing to circumnavigate Hallingford's strong focus on Russell Group universities. Certainly, he demonstrated how teachers 'driven by a social justice agenda' might find 'room for manoeuvre, a point of possible resistance' (Oliver and Kettley, 2010, p.750) to support students whose post-school aspirations did not conform to Hallingford's HE discourse. Mr Douglas' sense of social justice was evident from his passionate insistence that Hallingford needed to 'dismantle the nonsense' that students were 'no good' if they did not go to Oxbridge.

Types of gatekeeping

Although a facilitator for high attainers' access to 'elite' universities, the lack of time Mr Nelson gave to moderate attainers also indicated his power as gatekeeper to students' HE aspirations. Naz's experience of his form tutor's help suggested another type of gatekeeper whose help was felt to be perfunctory. One of four boys, Naz said he was deemed the 'responsible' and 'bright' son in his working class Iraqi family. Naz attained BBCC in his AS levels. His parents wanted him to be a doctor but accepted his preference for Physics or Astrophysics. Naz's anger and hurt when describing the support he received with his HE choosing appeared to stem from his feeling that his form tutor did not take his aspirations seriously:

To be honest, I wasn't given any help in the choosing process. He sat me down and said, 'Ok, we need to talk about your grades'...but it wasn't, sort of, like...in *my* best interests...it was more like: 'This is what I want to give you'...and he turns the screen round and shows me these grades then goes, 'So, therefore, we need to look at these unis'...Boom! Boom! Boom! (*striking an imaginary keyboard*) And that was it...unis like, no disrespect, but Bedfordshire, I think, was one.

(Naz, Hallingford)

Although part of a small group of ‘aggrieved’ moderate attainers, Naz also emerged as an assertive and resourceful HE applicant. He was determined to go to a ‘good’ university, and ideally a Russell Group institution. He felt insulted by his form tutor’s approach to advising on HE choices. Adela, Mahnoor and Naz’s experiences of HE choosing made clear the value of the right *type* of teacher habitus for supporting moderate attainers who aspired to HE. The students’ gratitude to the teachers from whom they received help with their HE aspirations contrasted sharply with the hurt they experienced from a sense of having been rejected by other members of staff. Supportive teachers played an important role in the weaving of moderate attainers’ dreams (Goodlad and Thompson, 2007). Wherever these included ‘improbable futures’ (Goodlad and Thompson, 2007), such as Adela’s dream to be a doctor, it seemed that students needed only the necessary guidance and support at each stage of the HE process to feel able to choose wisely. Adela, Mahnoor and Naz’s experiences of help with the HE process all pointed to the important role teachers can play in helping students to weave a *version* of their dreams. With skilful support, university choices may be both attainable and ones in which moderately attaining students can take pride.

Form tutors on Hallingford's dominant discourse

I sensed caution from sixth form tutors when responding to my questions about Hallingford's focus on progression to Russell Group universities. However, all form tutors who agreed to be interviewed appeared to feel unease over the HE discourse of their school. Three referred specifically to pressure they felt to get students to apply to Russell Group universities. While Mr Nelson was never named, teachers indicated the source of this pressure indirectly, with a nod of the head towards the sixth form block. In interview, Mr Riley appeared conflicted about certain practices in which he took part. In a broad discussion about schools and how they supported students with their HE choosing, he appeared to want to trumpet the 'success' of Hallingford sixth form. However, almost immediately, a shift in tone parodied the nature of this success:

We're a very successful 6th form. We've certainly, historically, been the best state school sixth form [in the local LEA], and there's a big emphasis on: 'We get this proportion of students into university, and we get them into...(dramatic pause, hushed tone) Russell Group universities! And this year we got them into (as if reading from a list): medicine, dentistry, law, Oxford, Cambridge...

(Mr Riley, Hallingford)

Mr Riley described the attainment of his form group as 'not absolutely the crème de la crème' and explained his feelings about expectations that he steered students towards Russell Group universities:

I permanently feel (pauses) somewhat guilty...a bit...almost dirty... I feel like I'm (pauses) shaving the edges off square blocks to force them into round holes and I feel sometimes that we're selling these kids a pup...you know? We're not being entirely fair to them. [But] it's my duty to this school, to my employer and probably (sighs)...in a compromised way, in the best interests of these kids to enc- (stopping himself) to facilitate their applications to Russell Group universities. [...//] There are kids for whom I do it in a very half-hearted way because I don't deep down believe it's for them...and probably actually *they* don't. You can pick up from those kids that they're doing it because they feel they ought to...

(Mr Riley, Hallingford)

Another form tutor, Mr Wakefield, spoke about the school's 'badge of honour' in getting students to university, and particularly Russell Group and Oxbridge:

Accessing 'elite' universities is the focus of the school, because it's quite a badge of honour to say, 'We've got X number of kids who've got in to medicine or Oxbridge', or whatever...

(Mr Wakefield, Hallingford)

In the Hallingford hierarchy of sixth form groups, Mr Wakefield's group ranks below Mr Riley's 'second tier' form group. Mr Wakefield described his students as 'high to middling B students' and particularly susceptible to 'enormous pressures from

different directions which lead them in different directions'. By this he meant that students were pulled in 'directions' they would not necessarily choose for themselves. In addition to school pressure, many of his 'B students' were

...under huge family pressures to be a doctor. It's respectable to be a doctor, isn't it? [../] A lot of our students are brought up from a young age to think 'I *have* to go to a *great* university, I *have* to do medicine'.

(Mr Wakefield, Hallingford)

Form tutor to 'top' form group, Mr Derbyshire, said many of his students were also under parental pressure to apply for medicine. However, he was equally concerned about the number of students who were pressurised into applying for Oxbridge. Using a tone which implied he felt that expectations of success were unrealistic, Mr Derbyshire explained why applications to Oxbridge in his 'top' form group were annually in 'double figures':

There's some [students] who are...(pause) well, let's say, who are *leant on*...or 'encouraged' would be better...'encouraged' to apply to Oxbridge. There's one in my form group, he's applying to read English Literature at Oxford. He's really not too keen himself, because he's dead set on going to one of the Scottish universities where he can combine English with Computer Science but...you know, he's been pressurised...encouraged (*ironic laugh*) to apply for Oxbridge.

(Mr Derbyshire, Hallingford)

Mr Derbyshire also felt the focus on Russell Group universities made it difficult for students applying to other types of universities:

The Russell Group tends to get very good advertising here...we mention it a lot. I think there's a lot of kids who see that it's either a Russell Group university or failure.

(Mr Derbyshire, Hallingford)

The following table gives a summary of all Hallingford teacher participants involved in students' HE and non-HE choosing, with their perspectives on the HE discourse of their school.

Table 20

Hallingford teachers - educational background and position on school's HE discourse			
Member of staff	Position	University	Position on HE discourse, in particular Hallingford's focus on high attainers' university applications
Mr Austen ⁷²	Senior management; member of unofficial Oxbridge team	Liverpool BSc	Position unknown. However, actions pointed to supporter of students' HE choices, irrespective of university type.
Mr Nelson	Head of 6 th Form	Exeter BSc	Promoter of Hallingford's HE discourse with focus on Russell Group universities, especially Oxbridge. Actions indicated belief that other HE applicants needed less help.
Mr Windsor	Deputy Head of 6 th Form	Exeter BSc	Promoter of Hallingford's HE discourse with focus on Russell Group universities, especially Oxbridge. However, also keen to promote software designed with colleague to help students' HE and non-HE choosing.
Mr Derbyshire	Head of Department and 6 th form tutor ('Top' form group, Maths and Sciences)	Open University MSc	Believed that Hallingford's focus on Russell Group universities meant that students felt any other type of university was a 'failure'.
Mr Riley ⁷³	6 th form tutor ('Second Tier' form group – A levels)	Imperial PhD	Uncomfortable with focus on Russell Group universities. Felt 'dirty' about 'shaving the edges off square blocks to force them into round holes' and that 'push' towards Russell Group universities was in school's interest.

⁷² Mr Austen was not a research participant but I include him because of the help he gave to two moderate attainers with their UCAS applications.

⁷³ Hallingford teachers with a PhD did not use 'Dr' (unlike teachers at Parklands).

Table 20 (continued)

Member of staff	Position	University	Position on HE discourse, in particular Hallingford's focus on high attainers' university applications
Mr Wakefield	6 th form tutor (A levels and Applied A levels)	Manchester MChem	Described getting students to Oxbridge as a 'badge of honour' for Hallingford. Felt focus on Russell Group universities came from parents as well as school.
Mr Douglas	6 th form tutor (BTECs & Applied A levels)	Manchester PhD	Felt it was necessary to 'dismantle the nonsense' that 'if you don't go to Oxbridge you're not any good'. Particularly supportive of students who chose non-Russell Group and alternatives to HE.
Morgan	Data Manager	University unknown	'You'll find most of our kids aspire to university'.
Helen	Support staff - responsible for BTEC students	Did not go to university	Believed university was 'not for everyone'. Appeared to lack resources to be able to support students who sought apprenticeships.

The significance of Russell Group universities to moderate attainers

Moderate attainers Adela, Naz, Neena and Shafia, all aspired to Russell Group universities. However, when asked, they did not seem to know what the 'Russell Group' was. All assumed 'London unis' were Russell Group. When questioned, they meant by 'London unis', King's, LSE and UCL. Although Naz and Shafia guessed Durham and Warwick were Russell Group, generally, moderate attainers could not name a Russell Group university outside London. Adela and Neena believed Oxford Brooks was part of the Russell Group. All these students appeared to have internalised the message from sixth form noticeboards and Mr Nelson's assemblies that London Russell Group universities were the only institutions worth considering. For cultural and economic reasons, most moderate attainers wanted to study at an institution which would allow them to live at home. However, there was a horror of post-1992 'new' universities, even where travel would have been relatively easy.

The ignorance of the range of universities available, and especially of long established, 'good' and less selective Russell Group universities, indicated a lack of support and guidance throughout the HE process. When Naz and Tim did not attain their predicted A level grades, their distress appeared to be bound up with the status of the universities offering places through Clearing. When Neena did not attain her predicted A level grades, her texts suggested she felt ashamed of her university place:

Hey Miss. I did really bad. I got CCD :(I got in through clearing at Nottingham Trent :(for chemistry. But at least I'm going to uni :)

(Text from Neena, Hallingford)⁷⁴

Neena's way of managing her HE choice was to tell me she planned to 'work really hard' so that she could progress to 'a London uni to do a Master's'. Similarly, Adela, Naz and Tim all found it difficult to accept recommendations to apply to 'average' or post-1992 'new' universities. As Oliver and Kettley (2010) point out, HE choice is mediated by many complex factors and influences (p.738). The pressure on Hallingford students and teachers to attain Russell Group places appeared to be an additional constraint for Hallingford moderate attainers, and one not explored in Oliver and Kettley's study.

When 'choice' means decision-making

As well as the cognitive and socio-economic constraints of the kind Ball et al (2002b) describe, many Hallingford moderate attainers had their HE choosing complicated by the desire to boast a Russell Group choice on their UCAS application. Mr Derbyshire's observation that choosing a non-Russell Group university meant 'failure' for many students was evident from Adela's feeling that 'averagey' universities were 'rubbish places' and Neena's downturned smiley for Nottingham Trent. Ball et al (2001b) suggest that for some students, HE choosing is less a matter of 'choice' and more one of 'decision-making', because while

⁷⁴ Other than occasionally to arrange interviews with some Hallingford and Parklands students, I did not communicate with students by text until after my research in schools was completed. I used texts to obtain students' A level results and their HE or other destinations. A number of students also kept in touch by text during their first year at university or in an apprenticeship.

choice suggests openness in relation to a psychology of preferences, decision-making alludes to both power and constraint.

(Ball et al, 2002b, p.51)

The particular constraints on Hallingford's moderate attainers' HE choices appeared to be related to 'a lot more than just [those associated with the difficulties of] matching of qualifications and attainments to opportunities' (Ball et al, 2002b, p.54). The emphasis that the school placed on accessing a Russell Group university appeared to make it impossible for some to imagine progressing to a non-Russell Group institution. Several struggled to accept that the 'cognitive/performative' (Ball et al, 2002b, p.52) element of their HE decision-making precluded access to the very universities and/or courses to which the HE discourse of their school encouraged them to aspire. A further challenge came with the 'power and constraint' of the 'social/cultural' element which, Ball et al explain, relates to the 'social classifications of self and institutions' (Ball et al, 2002b, pp.52-3). Many Hallingford moderate attainers came from working-class, ethnic minority families who expected their offspring study to be a doctor or a lawyer. When this expectation was reinforced by the message that Russell Group universities were the only institutions *worth* applying for, it was unsurprising that some students felt reluctant to choose 'averagey' institutions.

The HE discourse at St John's

The *visible* evidence of an HE discourse was not as strong at St John's as at Hallingford. However, the weight of expectation that students would progress to university was felt to be 'everywhere' (sixth form tutor, Mrs Barker). In addition, Head of Sixth Form, Mrs Jay, described the pressure from parents for whom university was deemed the *only* post-school choice. Mrs Jay explained, 'Our parents won't hear of their kids going into apprenticeships'.

Unlike Hallingford, St John's sixth form groups are not organised hierarchically. In year 12, any sixth former was welcome to attend Mr Brothers' once weekly Oxbridge Group meetings during which students enjoyed discussions on current affairs and received some training in critical thinking. In year 13, students who attained four As at AS level were selected for the Oxbridge Group and a marked differentiation in

support for UCAS applications for different attainment groups came into effect. During Year 13 Oxbridge Group meetings students were trained in critical thinking, coached for Oxbridge entrance tests and the Oxbridge interview, and given intensive support for the writing of personal statements.

High attaining students who did not voluntarily join the year 13 Oxbridge Group and who Mr Brothers believed were 'potential Oxbridge material' (Mr Brothers) were encouraged by him and other senior teachers to attend. However, unlike Hallingford's high attainers, students at St John's appeared able to resist the pressure to apply to Oxbridge. Two high attaining St John's students told me they did not want to be part of Mr Brothers' group and were not interested in applying to Oxbridge. Although persistently encouraged to apply for medicine at Oxbridge, Alice told me she was more interested in nursing. She also appeared reluctant to be associated with the Oxbridge Group which she described as 'uncool'. Eventually, Alice decided to take a gap year, after which she was accepted to read Biology at Bristol. Kayode, who came from a working-class Black family, also rejected Oxbridge. I wondered if this had anything to do with the fact the Oxbridge Group was dominated by a group of white, middle-class girls. When I asked Kayode, he smiled and said 'it was more that' he did not like Oxford and Cambridge. He had visited both universities and preferred Warwick, where Kayode successfully applied to study Mechanical Engineering.

'Life Skills' form periods

At St John's, students were encouraged to start thinking about HE choosing in the final term of year 12. In addition to a formal UCAS day, weekly Life Skills form periods were used to get students 'thinking about uni' (Miss Harrison, assistant to Mrs Jay). Miss Harrison explained that students were prepared for making their UCAS applications through the completion of year 12 and year 13 'Attainment and Aspirations' booklets carried out during Life Skills periods. In the booklet, students recorded predicted grades, targets, tracking grades and tests results. Other pages were used to record open days and conferences attended, 'Contributions to 6th Form and Charity Events' and any extracurricular activities. The year 13 booklet included a page where students entered dates for the start and completion of their personal statement, 'Course/Job research done' and 'CV written and up to date'. Form tutor, Mr

Boxall, explained that if students completed their booklets ‘properly’, form tutors had ‘all [they] need to write students’ UCAS references’. I was given to understand by Miss Harrison that form tutors aimed to discuss students’ UCAS applications with them in person. However, the booklet made it ‘easier’ to write UCAS references for form groups of around 25 students. During the first term of year 13, students were expected to work on their UCAS applications during Life Skills periods while high attainers attended their weekly Oxbridge Group tutorials. High attainers were not expected to complete ‘Attainment and Aspirations’ booklets. In interviews which took place at the end of year 12, I asked students about their booklet: few appeared to have completed it and some confessed they had lost their copy or did not know where it was kept. Ella described the booklet as ‘patronising’. Zoe said her form tutor rarely turned up for their hour-long Life Skills form period, and she did not believe her form group had ever received copies of the ‘Attainment and Aspirations’ booklet. Year 13 interviews with moderate attainers revealed they received minimal support during Life Skills periods, and especially for the drafting of their personal statement. Amy recalled some of the ‘bright kids’ giving presentations about Oxbridge visits. She said that there had also been some discussions about ‘choosing our unis and what to look for kind of thing’. Most moderate attainers reported using their Life Skills periods to do homework.

Ella was the only St John’s moderate attainer who had been given advice on her university choices by a teacher who had since left St John’s. Ella did not feel she had the same relationship with her new Geography teacher:

I don’t know my new teacher, so I didn’t trust her opinion - there was no point me going to her. I didn’t feel I could. With [former teacher], I listened to her. She told me to look at Sheffield for Geography. I didn’t like Sheffield but then she told me to look at other unis, like Leicester. She told me more about university stuff than anyone.

(Ella, St John’s)

The Oxbridge Group

While designed to be useful for form tutors, the ‘Attainment and Aspirations’ booklets were not a substitute for the kind of supportive relationship with a form

tutor which high attaining ‘bang outs’ Ruth and Katie described having with their Oxbridge tutor, Mr Brothers.⁷⁵ When Ruth and Katie were asked, in separate interviews, what they thought took place during Life Skills, Katie shrugged her shoulders and said she ‘imagined’ form tutors helped students with their UCAS applications.

Ruth was more willing than Katie to discuss the differentiation in support St John’s gave different attainment groups for their UCAS applications:

NMB *You probably know that as an Oxbridge candidate you get a lot more help than someone who wants to go, for example, to Derby or Portsmouth...*

Ruth Yeah...

NMB *So (pause) my question to you is: how do you feel about that?*

Ruth About?

NMB *About the fact that you get much more help...*

Ruth Well, I think if you’re applying to Oxford or Cambridge, there’s a much higher standard so you need more help. It’s a lot harder to get into; if you just got the same level of support as everyone else you...you need an extra push because - *(stops herself)* And I think everyone else does still get help, at some level...at an appropriate level of support for where they are applying to... *(pause)* but I think I understand why people who don’t apply to Oxbridge would be annoyed at not getting as much help.

NMB *Actually, I don’t think they’re annoyed with you guys.*

Ruth I would be!

NMB *You would be?*

⁷⁵ Neither Katie nor Ruth claimed to know the term ‘bang out’. Possibly, they were embarrassed by it. Alternatively, their ignorance of the term was the result of the social segregation between high and moderate attainers at St John’s, which I discuss further in Chapter 6.

Ruth Yeah, if I was in their position, I would be really annoyed...I would be like expecting that for everyone.

NMB *That's very generous...very honest of you.*

Ruth I mean I'm not in [Life Skills], which everyone else does, but I assumed it was interviews and preparation and personal statements. You know, like us...so, we go to Oxbridge Group, and do the same sort of thing, but at a higher level...

On questioning, it emerged that none of St John's six high attainers, whether or not they attended Oxbridge Group, were aware that moderate attainers received less support with their HE applications than high attainers. Bridget and Kayode gave the impression that they did not take Life Skills very seriously and had sought advice for their personal statements from subject teachers. Conversely, moderate attainers seemed fully aware of the higher levels of support given to high attainers, especially Oxbridge applicants. Zoe and Ella felt this was unfair. Ella explained:

This school is very, very much about if you're Oxford and Cambridge then it's fantastic. They'll take you out of form times and put you in special groups; they'll take you through everything, your personal statement, your interviews...

(Ella, St John's)

The general lack of support given to students applying to non-Russell Group universities at St John's meant that it was common to find no-one was checking the progress of moderate attainers' UCAS applications. Simon never submitted a UCAS application and no-one noticed (see Chapter 7). However, under pressure from his parents, he had started to research business degrees:

I couldn't decide what - (*pausing, struggling to control his emotions*) the problem is, unless you're doing Law or Medicine, there's so many variations on a degree that you can do! You can do business and management, business with events or finance with music...the choice is *huge*...and it's just me sitting at my computer in my room thinking what do I want to do for the next three years?

(Simon, St John's)

Simon's older sister was the person to whom he turned for advice and support. When she was away at university, Simon appeared lonely and confused. In a similar way to Reay's (1998) working class students, Simon's experience of HE choosing was a 'solitary process' (p.526). No-one at St John's had asked Simon what he hoped to do when he left school and there was 'no-one, really' he could talk to, to get advice. Simon's description of his weekly Life Skills periods brought to light his form tutor Mr Boxall's practice of focusing on students applying to Russell Group universities. Simon, whose subject choices meant he was in classes with high attaining A level science students, felt that prioritising high attainers was common:

I think it just depends on [the student] you are...if people have expressed an interest in doing Science, then my teachers help them a lot with their [UCAS] applications. I have seen that happen, because I do Biology and Chemistry; but they haven't shown any sort of interest in me. I've seen people giving teachers personal statements, going for interview practice, going on courses and getting their references...the kind of people going for medicine, veterinary medicine, engineering...those kind of people get *a lot* of help...but then they tend to be clever, above average, so...(trails off).

(Simon, Hallingford)

Simon's shyness and lack of confidence meant he was easily overlooked. His final comment gave me the impression that he accepted that teachers prioritised 'clever' students. In a similar way to Hopper's (1972) description of the 'status training' of lower attaining students, moderate attainers Amy, Benny and Simon appeared to accept that high attainers received more support. Although Benny and Simon would express opinions which suggested their frustrations over a lack of support for their

aspirations, they appeared resigned. Amy told me she believed high attainers' university applications were harder and that this was why they 'you have to have things like the Oxbridge Group'.

St John's sixth form tutors' perspectives

When I asked sixth form tutor, Mr Boxall, how he supported students in the HE process, he waved the 'Attainment and Aspirations' booklet at me by way of an answer. I said that from talking to students it appeared some did not find the booklet very helpful. Mr Boxall stated, 'Our students all want to go to university'. For this reason, St John's students were 'highly motivated' and could be trusted to get on with their UCAS applications. When I asked how he could be sure that every student completed a UCAS application, Mr Boxall became impatient and told me that such students would be 'picked up by the school office', referring to the small team of women who supported Mrs Jay in the final checking of all students' UCAS applications. When the Head of Sixth Form, Mrs Jay, referred a student to Mr Boxall, he was willing to help. He seemed eager to tell me about a student who Mrs Jay had sent to him for advice, in his capacity as an Economics teacher:

We have students applying for silly courses, like there was one girl who [Mrs Jay] sent to me because she wanted to do Economics and Business without an Economics A level (*laughs; adopts boastful tone*). But we sorted that! I mean I helped her to write a personal statement which drew on anything businessy that she'd done, like helping in her aunty's pharmacy, and she's got offers for business...I think.

(Mr Boxall, St John's)

Neither Simon nor moderate attainer Vicky who was taught by Mr Boxall and whose HE choices included degrees in Business and Accountancy, received the same levels of support for their post-school choosing as the student sent to him by Mrs Jay.

St John's form tutor Mrs Beard, made no secret of giving more support to students who were applying to Russell Group universities. A former research scientist and mother of two daughters who had studied at Russell Group universities, she seemed unembarrassed to admit giving enhanced levels of support to selected students. She

stated, as fact, that Russell Group universities looked at grades and personal statements whereas ‘new’ universities ‘only bothered about grades’. Her justification for concentrating her support on Russell Group applicants during Life Skills periods was that students applying to ‘new’ universities ‘get in anyway’. My attempts to interview two other St John’s sixth form tutors revealed that both were new to the role and did not feel in a position to discuss how they supported students with their UCAS applications. Moderate attainers, Amy and Vicky, both experienced a lack of support with the drafting of their personal statements, and both had inexperienced sixth form tutors. I discuss their experiences in Chapter 6.

The following table gives a summary of all St John’s teacher participants involved in students’ HE and non-HE choosing, with their position on the HE discourse of their school.

Table 21

St John's teachers - educational background and position on school's HE discourse			
Member of staff	Position	University	Position on HE discourse, in particular St John's focus on high attainers' university applications
Mr Reid	Assistant Head, Head of KS4 and KS5	Liverpool BA	Focused support on Oxbridge applicants. Organised and escorted Oxbridge visits. Felt help was 'out there' for other students.
Mrs Jay	Head of 6 th Form	Southampton BEd	Supporter of students' HE choices, irrespective of university type. Worked hard to provide information for alternatives to HE. Felt high attainers 'got a lot'.
Mr Collins	Deputy Head of 6 th Form	Exeter BSc	Did not comment directly. Actions pointed to belief that Oxbridge applicants needed teacher support and that other HE applicants did not.
Mr Brothers	Oxbridge tutor	City BSc	Focused support on Oxbridge applicants. Concerned St John's lacked teachers with sufficient subject knowledge to support applications to 'elite' universities.
Miss Shaw	Head of Social Sciences	York BA	Supporter of students' HE choices, irrespective of university type. Took pride in fact that the very few Oxbridge places gained by St John's students in recent years had been by students of Sociology and Psychology (i.e. non-facilitating subjects)
Mrs Barker	6 th form tutor	Brunel BSC	Felt students were 'pushed' towards university by school and parents.

Table 21 (continued)

Member of staff	Position	University	Position on HE discourse, in particular St John's focus on high attainers' university applications
Mrs Beard	6 th form tutor	Surrey MSc	Focused support on Russell Group applicants. Believed students applying to 'new' universities 'get in anyway'.
Mr Boxall	6 th form tutor	City BSc	Focused support on Russell Group applicants. Believed 'all' students wanted to go to university and were self-motivated to apply.
Miss Greenfield	6 th form tutor	University unknown	Felt students were 'pushed' towards university by school and parents.
Mr Knowles	Member of staff responsible for bi-annual HE and Careers evening.	Sports Sciences (non-UK university)	Keen to provide information on alternatives to HE.
Miss Harrison	Assistant to Mrs Jay, Head of 6 Th Form	Did not go to university	Did not comment. Very positive about daughter's decision to apply for apprenticeship.
Mrs Hollis	Peripatetic careers adviser	Mature student of local 'new' university (institution unknown)	Supporter of students' HE choices, irrespective of university type. Said St John's students' were expected to go to 'uni'.

Hallingford and St John's moderate attainers - luke warm knowledge

At Hallingford and St John's, moderate attainers appeared to receive contradictory messages. Although subjected to the expectation that they would progress to university, and in some cases very strongly encouraged, the majority reported receiving minimal support during the HE process. As Zoe observed moderate attainers were expected to 'fend for' themselves:

The smart kids get mollycoddled all the way through. Kids like us, the schools makes you feel like you need to fend for yourself...you kind of hit the ground running, like with the transition from GCSE to A levels, they never gave us the stepping stones...and they've done that with everything for [students like] us.

(Zoe, St John's)

In the absence of support for the HE process, many moderate attainers who aspired to HE spoke about their university choosing in a way which indicated a reliance on internet searches and/or rumour. Students spoke with a certainty about how 'good' a university was, citing its position in league tables or because of something they had heard in school. Students' research of online league tables indicated that some assumed high institutional scores in student satisfaction indicated high scores for all degree courses. Students appeared to believe they were accessing 'hot' knowledge through internet searches. However, in a way which echoes Smith's (2011) study of low-SES students and their use of 'cold' factual/formal information when HE choosing, many moderate attainers appeared to need the support of an informed adult with the appropriate knowledge and skills to help them to use official websites and league tables correctly and usefully (Smith, 2011, p.175). Without support, moderate attainers appeared susceptible to misrecognising the 'luke warm' knowledge of half-truths, hearsay or rumour about the UCAS application, universities and/or their locations, as sources of 'hot' knowledge. Ball (2012) states that in the absence of 'other, more reliable sources of information' (p.219) rumour

is a way of filling in missing information or explaining the inexplicable.

Rumours operate in and around formal decision-making as a form of second-order accounting.

(Ball, 2012, p.219)

In a similar way, some moderate attainers believed that anecdotal evidence or a widely circulated story, pointed to the veracity of something heard. For example, Amy had heard of a way to gain more UCAS points, which she felt would widen her choice of universities:

D'you know if it's true...because one of my friends said it, but I can't find it anywhere when I look it up...is it true if you do, like, work experience or volunteering or in a specialised area...say, like I went to a hospital and spoke to elderly people to see how they were getting on – would I get an extra 50 points?

(Amy, St John's)

It is possible that for Amy, who was advised to drop an A level because of poor mock results, the desire to gain extra UCAS points may have made her susceptible to unreliable information. However, more commonly, rumours appeared to be in the form of information students had heard about specific universities and/or their geographical location.

'Cos I know one of my friends, she went to Birmingham and she said it's amazing there.

(Amy, St John's)

I'm going more towards Kent...because I know it's meant to be a really lovely area.

(Vicky, St John's)

Chichester sounds more homely, from what I've heard.

(Zoe, St John's)

I was told Coventry has rubbish nightlife, but I like the idea of a campus university. I like modern things.

(Ravi, Hallingford)

It's on the coast. I'm not sure I'd really like that. I've never been to Brighton in my life, and no-one I know's been there.

(Naz, Hallingford)

Sometimes, it was necessary to clarify with students if they were referring to the academic institution or its geographical location. Some appeared to have conflated

the two, or did not appreciate that a university might be more, or less, attractive than its location. Some students were also unaware that some universities ran degree courses at secondary campuses and some confused Southampton Solent with Southampton and Oxford Brooks with Oxford.⁷⁶ Without meaningful one to one support for their HE choosing, many moderate attainers relied on anecdotal information from friends and the internet about a university and its location. Combined with the 'cold' knowledge of university websites, some appeared to be making HE choices on 'gut feeling'. Cost and the lack of adult support meant few moderate attainers chose to visit universities outside London. Those that did, arranged and paid for trips themselves. By contrast, St John's high attainers were taken on overnight visits to Oxbridge colleges by their school. At Hallingford, high attaining students benefited from trips organised by both the school and The Sutton Trust.

Support for the HE process at Parklands

Parklands' has a dedicated team which provides support for boys' university applications. The team is headed by Head of Careers, Mrs Pearson, and includes 18 subject specialists and two non-teaching administrative staff. Subjects specialists are responsible for advising on students' university choices and supervising the drafting of the personal statements. They are given a formal allowance of one period in recognition of the amount of work needed to support students' UCAS applications. Sixth form tutors write students' UCAS references and a small team of senior management, which includes the Head of Careers, the Head and Deputy Head of Sixth Form and the school's Deputy Head, check every UCAS application. In addition, Parklands hosts separate Higher Education and Careers evenings. The HE evening I observed was attended by admissions tutors from Oxford and Cambridge and a selection of Russell Group, as well as some less selective, 'good' (but no post-1992 'new') universities. Each university had a stand with representatives on hand to talk to parents and boys. The evening opened with talks on the university application process given by Parklands' Heads of Careers and Sixth Form and an Oxbridge admissions tutor. In addition to informal conversations with university

⁷⁶ In addition, students did not know that Kent has campuses in Canterbury and Medway and that Chichester has a campus in Bognor Regis.

representatives, during the course of the evening, parents and boys also attended a choice of formal presentations on subject-specific admissions given by a range of admissions tutors from both 'elite' and 'good' universities, and a medical school.

The school's separate Careers Evening was testament to Parklands' wide social network. Parklands alumni and staff contacts included medics, solicitors, barristers and representatives from a range of prestigious financial institutions. In addition, there were representatives from professions such as quantity surveying, the media, marketing and psychotherapy, plus two self-made young businessmen.

Interviews with Parklands staff and students left me with the impression that the school's system of support, in particular for boys' UCAS applications, worked because it was delivered by teachers with an active interest in the subject on which they advised. Many did not merely teach their subject, but also had an up to date, working knowledge of relevant degree courses. Some brought to their role valuable 'hot' knowledge from a previous career; some combined their teaching while still actively involved in the creative arts. Subject specialists with valuable contacts in prestigious law and investment companies, at Oxbridge, in Government and/or in the media, arranged lunchtime and evening talks designed to help students undecided about their choice of degree, or with questions about studying a particular subject or possible career. While Parklands' moderate attainers felt that Oxbridge tended to dominate Parklands' HE evening and the UCAS preparation days, the six moderate attainers who I was able to track through sixth form all felt well supported during the HE process. This applied equally to Danny and Zac, who did not conform to Parklands' HE discourse and the strong focus on 'top' Russell Group universities. Both aspired to degrees courses in the creative arts and both described receiving high levels of personalised support from teachers with specialised cultural capital, essential for Danny's application to study music and Zac's to study theatre. Interviews with Danny and Zac revealed a level of support and personal interest in their HE applications, which included auditions as well as personal statements (see Chapter 6), equal to the preparation given to the two Oxbridge applicants who took part in my research. The following table gives a summary of all Parklands teacher participants involved in students' university applications, with their position on the HE discourse of their school.

Table 22

Parklands teachers - educational background and position on school's HE discourse			
Member of staff	Position	University	Position on HE discourse
Mrs Dawson	Head of 6 th Form	Edinburgh MA	Supporter of students' HE choices, irrespective of university type.
Dr Tremain	Deputy Head of 6 th Form	King's College London PhD	Supporter of students' HE choices, irrespective of university type.
Mr Cartwright	6 th form tutor and departmental head	Bristol BA	Supporter of students' HE choices, irrespective of university type.
Dr Cox	6 th form tutor and departmental head	UCL PhD	Supporter of students' HE choices, irrespective of university type. Felt students were given too much help with their UCAS applications.
Mr Griffiths	6 th form tutor and departmental head	Oxford MMath	Strong pride in Oxbridge record.
Mrs Pearson	Head of Careers	Durham BA	Supporter of students' HE choices, irrespective of university type.
Mr Renouf	6 th form tutor and departmental head	Durham BA	Supporter of students' HE choices, irrespective of university type. Felt students were given too much help with their UCAS applications.
Mr Gabriel ⁷⁷	Subject specialist, Law	Cambridge BA	Position unknown. However, understood to be particularly supportive of Oxbridge applications.

⁷⁷ Mr Gabriel was not in my original sample of teachers but emerged as a useful example of a Parklands subject specialist and so I include him.

Concluding thoughts

The provision of support for students' university choosing and UCAS applications was organised quite differently in Hallingford, St John's and Parklands sixth forms. Nonetheless, there was little difference in the outcomes at Hallingford and St John's. Both schools shared an HE discourse which prioritised Russell Group applicants and both schools invested disproportionately in Oxbridge applicants. The schools' UCAS days comprised the only form of formally structured and compulsory support provided for moderate attainers' HE applications. However, UCAS days provided by Hallingford and St John's appeared of little value to students. The days were badly timed before the long summer break, and some of the advice and guidance given by external providers appeared to be of questionable quality (see Chapter 4). By the time students reached year 13, their school's UCAS day, and any advice given, had been forgotten. The competition for HE applicants meant many university representatives at the HE fairs hosted by Hallingford and St John's appeared to be better-informed at selling the 'lifestyle' promised by their institutions than their academic provision. Most students I observed at their schools' HE fairs had specific questions about courses which could not be answered. The 'selling' of an institution as a lifestyle choice (Ball et al, 2002b), was more prevalent among 'new' institutions whose target audience were moderately attaining students. In addition, moderately attaining HE applicants were more likely to lack the guidance of an adult to help them discriminate between marketing and potentially useful information (see Smith, 2011). It is perhaps inevitable that without personalised support, some moderate attainers mistook the 'luke warm' knowledge of hearsay and seductive websites for 'hot' knowledge when making their HE choices.

In spite of the formal allocation of weekly Life Skills form periods during which all non-Oxbridge applicants were meant to receive support for their UCAS applications, none of the moderately attaining HE applicants in my St John's sample were helped by their form tutor. Each had a different form tutor, which suggests their experiences were not untypical. By contrast, high attainers benefited from formal support in the form of a weekly tutorial and generous amounts of informal support from their Oxbridge tutor. At Hallingford, the lack of formally allocated time for students' HE applications left moderate attainers having to access support informally from a form

tutor or a subject teacher. This was risky in a school where the HE discourse focused on Russell Group applicants. The proactivity of senior teachers ensured no Oxbridge applicant lacked support. All other Russell Group applicants were supported by their form tutor and/or by Head of Sixth Form, Mr Nelson. Most moderate attainers applying to less selective universities failed to find a teacher willing to help them with their UCAS applications.

Hallingford and St John's moderate attainers' experiences of the HE process were strikingly similar. Superficially, Hallingford's multi-ethnic, working-class school habitus appeared in sharp contrast to St John's Christian, predominantly white, middle-class habitus. Yet the shape of the HE discourses in both schools meant moderate attainers were made to feel their HE applications were less important than those of their higher attaining peers. This suggests that there are greater influences on the practices employed by these schools than their institutional habituses might indicate. This might challenge the extent to which we can argue, in the current policy context, for the dominance of a school's institutional habitus on the provision of support for students' HE choosing and UCAS applications (see Reay et al, 2005).

The fact that three out of the eight Hallingford moderately attaining HE applicants found support from three different teachers was, in this context, exciting. The finding suggests that with the right type of habitus, some teachers are motivated to circumnavigate dominant HE discourses and support students normally overlooked in the distribution of resources. Why some Hallingford teachers used their agency to act as facilitators for students' applications to non-Russell Group applications when so many teachers in both Hallingford and St John's were reported to act as gatekeepers, deserves further research. There is some evidence to suggest that these teachers shared with Parklands' subject specialists the possession of enhanced cultural capital, as well as a more socially just approach to supporting differently attaining students. I return to this in Chapter 8.

It is not surprising that fee-paying Parklands should be able to provide high levels of support for students' HE choosing. However, being able to afford higher level of supports does not necessarily lead to an *equal* distribution of resources. It was a surprise therefore to find that a school which takes pride in its academic reputation should provide equally for students whose HE applications did not conform to its

particular HE discourse. As I show in Chapter 7, Hallingford and St John's were unable to provide support for the post-school choosing of their non-conforming students. Most significantly, it seemed that Parklands' system of support ensured a fairer distribution of teacher time, the resource which Hallingford and St John's moderately attaining HE applicants complained they lacked most.

In Chapter 6, I examine students' experiences of drafting their personal statement, an important part of the UCAS application and one where levels of support were most sharply differentiated.

CHAPTER 6

Differentiated support for the personal statement

We never get anything to put on our personal statement. Top students get everything, they get loads to put on theirs.

(Jennie, St John's)

Introduction

In this chapter, I examine how support for the personal statement was experienced by students, with a particular focus on Hallingford and St John's moderate attainers. A key part of the UCAS application, the importance teachers attributed to the personal statement was implicit in the amount of time they gave high attainers for the drafting process. The personal statement emerged as the part of the UCAS application over which moderate *and* high attainers expressed most anxiety. It also served as a key indicator of the perceived status of students' UCAS application and the university to which they were applying. It was for the drafting process of students' personal statements that levels of support were most sharply differentiated for different attainment groups at Hallingford and St John's.

When I designed my research project I had no intention of devoting a single chapter to any one part of the UCAS application. However, the lack of support for the drafting of the personal statement was something about which Hallingford and St John's moderate attainers who aspired to HE felt strongly. Final interviews involved emotional accounts about the difficulties they had with their personal statements.

Although the focus of this thesis is moderate attainers, I also include in this chapter a section in which I compare preparation for the Oxbridge interview in all three schools. Preparation for interview formed an important part of the 'package' of support given to high attainers for their UCAS applications. Support for the Oxbridge interview in Hallingford and St John's served as a further example of the enhanced levels of support given to this group of students. Importantly, coaching for

Oxbridge illuminated further the influences of institutional and teacher habitus on students' HE applications.

Admissions tutors' perspectives on the personal statement

The personal statement is a 4,000 character piece of writing where students demonstrate their suitability for the degree course(s) for which they are applying. It forms an important part of a student's UCAS application and is considered in conjunction with a school reference and their predicted A level grades by HE admissions staff.

A senior admissions tutor for Cambridge and the Director of Admissions at King's College, London (KCL) both confirmed that for 'elite' universities the personal statement is an important way to differentiate between equally high attaining candidates. However, KCL's Director of Admissions also said that personal statements may not always need to be considered for applications to selective universities. He explained that, provided students had the appropriate predicted grades, 'where the volume of places and applicants is in equilibrium, everyone who applies will get an offer' (see also Schwartz, 2004. P.30). Admissions staff for less selective universities, including Hertfordshire and Roehampton, explained that personal statements were taken into consideration for competitive degree courses and where courses were over-subscribed.

Support for writing the personal statement - who gets what

All Hallingford and St John's, high attaining students reported submitting several drafts of their statements and receiving detailed, personalised support from teachers during the drafting process. In contrast, the majority of moderate attainers struggled to find a teacher willing to give one to one guidance. Other than UCAS days held at the end of year 12, which most moderate attainers confessed they could not recall, the majority of moderate attainers received little support. Moderate attainers' accounts suggested that the stress of drafting a personal statement was made worse by their struggle to find someone willing to help them.

Hallingford

'Too busy' for moderate attainers

Hallingford did not provide any formal, timetabled, support for students' UCAS applications. Form periods of just 20 minutes meant moderately attaining students had to arrange time with a form tutor outside of form periods if they wanted help with their UCAS applications. All moderate attainers reported having had one meeting with their form tutor. However, all but three had been given advice that seemed perfunctory or described as rushed. Some, such as Zane, who applied to study Sonic Arts, and Mahnoor, who applied for courses in Aviation and Pilot Studies, were told by their form tutors that they could not advise on their personal statements because they lacked knowledge about their chosen degrees. Of the nine moderate attainers who applied to HE, one was helped by her form tutor, two by a senior teacher who also taught them, three were helped by a sibling and/or friends and three were helped by Mr Nelson. 'High end' moderate attainers, Shafia and Tim were the only moderate attainers in my sample who applied to Russell Group universities. Karim and Shafia also believed they were helped by Mr Nelson because they approached him well before the UCAS deadline.⁷⁸ Mr Nelson told me that he checked all students' statements if they got them to him 'in time'. It seemed that form tutors were the least likely person to advise moderate attainers on their personal statements.

Some moderately attaining students and some form tutors appeared confused over who was ultimately responsible for supervising students' personal statements. Some students believed that Mr Nelson was meant to check everyone's personal statements. This made it all the more difficult to understand when Mr Nelson told students he was 'too busy' to read their statements. A form tutor of one of Hallingford's 'top' form groups explained that Mr Nelson would assume responsibility for the UCAS applications of students he wished to 'encourage' to apply to Oxbridge.

Some moderate attainers explained that they avoided approaching Mr Nelson because as non-Russell Group applicants, they did not expect much help from him.

⁷⁸ See Chapter 5 for more on Mr Nelson's support for moderate attainers Karim and Tim.

Neena told me ‘No way’ would she go to Mr Nelson for help. Mahnoor said she could ‘count on one hand the times’ Mr Nelson had spoken to her. Mahnoor explained,

[Mr Nelson] is very elitist. The people who applied to Oxbridge, he spent hours with them...*hours* with them, helping them with their personal statements, reading it, going over all their choices and all this kind of stuff. [...//] One of my friends, he was applying for Business and he wanted [Mr Nelson] to read over his personal statement but [Mr Nelson] was like, ‘I don't have time.’ And then another time, [Mr Nelson] said to him, ‘I don't have time for this’. *(Pauses, as if to let this sink in)* Honestly.

(Mahnoor, Hallingford)

The experiences of Mahnoor’s friend were echoed by working-class moderate attainer, Zane. Zane found the necessary support for his HE choosing from friends who formed part of his social network of local musicians. Although friends had helped Zane to write his personal statement he wanted Mr Nelson to check it before submitting his UCAS application. Zane described approaching Mr Nelson three times. On each occasion, Zane was told, ‘I haven't got time, or come back later, kind of thing’. As the deadline for the submission of UCAS applications was drawing close, Zane tried for a fourth time. On this occasion, Mr Nelson told Zane he had ‘left it too late’ and that the only time Mr Nelson could spare him was on a day the rest of the sixth form were off school, to allow for staff training. Zane came in to school only to be kept waiting all morning before Mr Nelson gave him ‘about ten minutes’. Zane shrugged his shoulders and said, ‘He's busy, I guess’. Zane’s tone suggested he saw no point in getting upset about the way he was treated. It is possible that Zane’s tolerance stemmed from the fact that he was less reliant on Mr Nelson than other moderate attainers. The support Zane was given for his HE choosing from his musician friends (See Chapters 5 and 7) demonstrated to Zane that there were areas where Mr Nelson was not expert. While Mr Nelson’s approach delayed Zane’s UCAS submission, his influence during the HE process was minimal.

High attainer Asmit's description of what happened when his friend approached Mr Nelson for help with his personal statement echoed Zane's experience and that of Mahnoor's friend:

One of my friends...he's not as (*choosing words carefully*) not as high achieving...he's applying to Portsmouth. I mean, for kids like that, who aren't as...(*changing tack*) Well, it's like this: if I went up to Mr Nelson and said 'Hey! Could you look at this?' He would do it like that (*snaps his fingers*) whereas he made my friend like, wait for two weeks. So...(*trailing off*).

(Asmit, Hallingford)

Asmit ended here in a way that suggested to me he felt he did not have to elaborate further, and it seemed clear that he recognised the injustice of Mr Nelson's approach. In a similar way, high attainer Kirti made a point of explaining the difference between the level of support given to Hallingford's high and moderate attainers with their personal statements:

We high attainers, they'll call us. Like they'll come and find you and ask to see what you've written. That sort of thing. Lower achieving students, who find this stuff harder anyway, are running around trying to find someone to help. That's the difference. We get *called* and they have to like *look* for someone.

(Kirti, Hallingford)

By 'they' Kirti explained that she meant Mr Nelson and three senior teachers who were responsible for helping Oxbridge applications with their personal statements: 'We [high attainers] all know who they are, even if it's not official. I mean I don't think other students know, exactly'. High attainer, Sumeer explained a 'bunch of the usual suspects', headed by Mr Nelson, comprised the team of senior teachers who supervised Oxbridge personal statements. As an example of the kind of privileged help he was given, Sumeer described how one of the senior teachers once 'stuck on a DVD' for their year 7 class and devoted the hour-long lesson to helping him draft his personal statement for Oxford. Sumeer said, '...but the kids didn't seem to mind (*laughs weakly*).' I gained the impression that Sumeer was not entirely comfortable with this preferential treatment.

Peer support

At St John's, it was noticeable that friendships were strictly within subject and attainment groupings. Benny was the only St John's moderate attainer who described receiving help from two high attaining friends who, like Benny, were members of a local youth orchestra. As a student of Design Technology and Music Technology, it seemed unlikely Benny would otherwise have found himself being helped by members of St John's Oxbridge Group. At Hallingford, however, high attainers helped their moderately attaining friends with their personal statements. The cultural diversity of the area surrounding the school is reflected in friendships groups which, unlike St John's, appeared to cross class, ethnic *and* attainment divisions. Hallingford moderate attainer, Hari, told me that his friend high attainer Asmit told him what he needed 'to talk about' in his personal statement. Asmit had attended a Sutton Trust Pathways course and passed on to Hari exactly the kind of knowledge many moderate attainers in my study appeared to lack.⁷⁹ Hari explained,

You have to tell them about skills from the subjects you do that you can bring to the degree...so like, for Law, you show organisation skills, reading skills...and why did [A level] Government and Politics appeal to me, and why it's good for Law...and to show your knowledge of Law and current events, as well.

(Hari, Hallingford)

In a similar way, high attaining Fahima described holding 'a sort of lesson' for personal statement writing for a group of students in the sixth form computer room. She explained the lesson 'just happened' after she was overheard helping a friend. Fahima explained,

Suddenly, everyone was asking for help! It was like, 'Hey, [Fahima], over here!' and '[Fahima] can you look at this?' and, 'I'm next!' (*laughs*) But it's easy for...I'm good at English, plus we were told what they want, by UCL [summer school]. And I've already done my personal statement for Oxford, so I know exactly what you have to do.

⁷⁹ See Appendix N for details of LSE's Pathways to Law course.

When drafting her personal statement, Mahnoor turned to her best friend and Cambridge applicant, Kirti, for advice. Like Fahima, Kirti attended a summer school at UCL and was in a good position to help Mahnoor. Mahnoor explained:

[Kirti's] been very supportive. She's really good at wording and she knew how to structure things. She helped me with the phrasing, you know, and how to show my personality as well my interest in the course. I can't say it enough. I really appreciated it (...//) Even though she's applied to Cambridge, [Kirti] said she could see [Mr Nelson] helps the Oxbridge kids more.

(Mahnoor, Hallingford)

High attainers Kirti, Asmit and Fahima, all appeared to have well informed, accurate advice on how to write a personal statement. Although high attainers were grateful for the help they were given, four out of the six high attainers, Asmit, Fahima, Kirti and Sumeer, talked about the unfairness they observed in the way support was distributed at Hallingford. In particular, they described the levels of support given by Mr Nelson to different attainers.⁸⁰ Kirti explained,

I had great advice from [Mr Nelson], he made me sound more professional...replacing words, changing phrases here and there. [...//] He helped me phrase things to make me sound more confident. So, I knew what to do, and then it was easy for me to help [Mahnoor]. But a lot of my friends aren't applying to Russell Group, and I see how poorly [Mr Nelson] treats them.

(Kirti, Hallingford)

In addition to the enhanced support high attainers received from Mr Nelson and the Oxbridge team, all six high attainers who took part in my research described benefiting from Sutton Trust courses at leading London universities. Five spoke enthusiastically of the detailed guidance they were given for the writing of their personal statements. Only high attaining Sumeer admitted that he attended his Sutton Trust course at the LSE because he thought it would 'look good' (Sumeer) on his personal statement (see

⁸⁰ See Chapter 5 for more on the support Asmit, Fahima and Sumeer received for their HE applications.

Shuker, 2014). Nonetheless, Sumeer enjoyed the access his course gave him to the LSE's library.

Facilitating Teachers

In Chapter 5, I argued that three Hallingford teachers possessed a teacher habitus characterised by a more socially just approach to supporting students with their HE choosing. Just as Oliver and Kettley (2010) argued that some teachers facilitated students' applications to 'elite' universities, I argued that these Hallingford teachers were facilitators for moderate attainers' access to HE. The support Mr Austen and Mr Riley gave moderate attainers for the drafting of their personal statements demonstrated a consistently *just* approach to supporting moderate attainers.⁸¹ Two moderate attainers, Mahnoor and Naz, approached Mr Austen for guidance because they were taught by him and trusted his advice. Although a senior teacher and part of Hallingford's Oxbridge team, Mr Austen appeared equally generous with the time he gave high and moderately attaining HE applicants. It was a point made by Mahnoor and Naz. Having had help with her personal statement from her high attaining friend Kirti, Mahnoor asked Mr Austen to check it:

[Mr Austen] didn't just skim read my personal statement, like some teachers do. They do do that. I have friends who've told me how their form tutor or whoever goes, 'Yeah, that's fine', and then a friend sees a spelling mistake, you know? [Mr Austen's] not like that. I sat with him and we had a twenty-minute discussion going through it. I feel I can really talk to [Mr Austen].

(Mahnoor, Hallingford)

For moderate attainer, Mahnoor, it was flattering to have a senior teacher take an active interest in her UCAS application. Her experience of meeting with Mr Austen was in sharp contrast to the treatment Mahnoor described receiving from other teachers.⁸² In the course of our three interviews during Mahnoor's sixth form, it became clear that she felt her status as a working-class moderate attainer keenly. She described how teachers spoke 'to the more brainy people' in class, or to 'nice kids'

⁸¹ Mr Douglas did not feature in moderate attainers' accounts of teachers who helped with their personal statements.

⁸² See Chapter 4, where Mahnoor describes being bullied by a teacher.

like poshly-spoken moderate attainer, Tim. Mahnoor's description of her twenty-minute interview with Mr Austen stood out as the only example she gave of a teacher taking an interest in her and her aspirations.

Moderate attainer, Adela's experience of writing her personal statement started positively. After a meeting with her Biology teacher and form tutor, Mr Riley, Adela felt confident about what to write:

[Mr Riley] went through it with me, so I knew exactly what to do, he told me what you need to put for Psychology, and I mean I was working *really* hard to get it right...

(Adela, Hallingford)

However, with two weeks to go before Hallingford's deadline for the submission of UCAS applications, Mr Nelson came across Adela working on her personal statement:

He just started going on at me to get my UCAS submitted...he was rushing everybody. But with me, he was like, 'Send it off! Send it off!'...and I was like, 'But I want to make sure my personal statement is okay'. But he kept on at me, 'Just get it in...just get it in'.

(Adela, Hallingford)

Adela was already dispirited by Mr Nelson's gatekeeping of her HE choices (see Chapter 5). Feeling under pressure, Adela submitted her UCAS application before her personal statement was 'really ready'. Adela concluded her story about Mr Nelson's involvement with her UCAS application with a shrug of her shoulders. Forcing a smile, and scanning my face to gauge my reaction, she said, 'I feel like he doesn't care?'. Adela used a rising inflection at the end of her statement. She seemed anxious to downplay any criticism of Mr Nelson. Adela's problems appeared to have been compounded by having two teachers involved in her UCAS application. Only one of these teachers knew Adela well, as suggested by Mr Riley's tact when helping Adela to rethink her aspiration to be a doctor (see Chapter 5). It seemed clear from our interviews, that Mr Riley was the only person who had talked to Adela about her UCAS application and who had taken the time to guide her through the drafting of

her personal statement. As with many students, Adela believed Head of Sixth Form, Mr Nelson, was the school expert on Higher Education. However, it seemed possible that Mr Nelson's teacher habitus was not best suited to advising moderate attainer, Adela. Adela sensed her unfair treatment but her criticism of Mr Nelson was tentative. Although aggrieved, she conformed to his expectations.

In a similar way to Adela, Naz's HE choosing was problematic. However, unlike Adela, Naz appeared less willing to accept advice from someone he believed did not have his own best interests at heart. Naz's frustrations started with his form tutor's perfunctory approach to helping him with his HE choosing (see Chapter 5). Problems re-surfaced during the drafting of his personal statement. Naz told me he believed the long delay in getting his personal statement checked was because his form tutor 'couldn't be bothered'.⁸³ With the school deadline for UCAS applications imminent, Naz decided to approach Mr Austen for help. To Naz's amazement, Mr Austen took his personal statement and 'turned it around in a day':

He helped me big time, like one million per cent. Like I was way over [the word limit] ...like double what I should have been. He corrected it using, you know, Tracking? It was helpful...like I got what I was meant to do. I mean...(hesitant) I don't know if I'm meant to be saying this...but [Mr Austen] does help kids like me *way* more than other teachers.

(Naz, Hallingford)

When I asked Naz what he meant by his last comment, he said, 'You know, like I'm not Oxbridge but he'd still help me'. Naz's amazed gratitude to Mr Austen suggested that Naz was unused to such generosity from a teacher. In a similar way, Mahnoor's delight over the time Mr Austen gave her indicated that it was exceptional.

A total of 14 Hallingford students out my original cohort of 19 student research participants progressed to university. Of the nine moderate attainers who applied to university, eight were successful. Of these eight, five failed to attain the necessary grades for their first and insurance HE choices and found their university places through Clearing. In addition, one high attainer found his place through Clearing.⁸⁴

⁸³ In interview, Naz's form tutor blamed Naz for the delays in the drafting process.

⁸⁴ See Table 14 for a reminder of all Hallingford HE applicants and their final destinations.

Moderately attaining HE applicant, Hari, did not attain the necessary grades for Law and applied for an apprenticeship. In Chapter 7, I discuss Hallingford and St John's non-conformers further, and the types of support on which they relied for their post-school choosing.

St John's

'Mollycoddled' high attainers

As at Hallingford, teacher time was a resource given in abundance to St John's high attainers. In addition to weekly one-hour tutorials, Oxbridge tutor, Mr Brothers, gave as much one to one support as the 15 Oxbridge applicants felt they needed when drafting their personal statements. Teacher time was the resource moderate attainers complained they lacked most when writing their personal statements. As moderate attainer, Zoe said, 'smart kids' at St John's were 'mollycoddled, all the way through' by teachers, but especially with their UCAS applications. As an 'average' student, Zoe said she lacked the 'kind of relationship' which high attainers enjoyed with their teachers and this made it difficult to ask for help:

They don't take care of any of us who are just 'standard'...average...and going to ordinary places, you know? And then you...I didn't like to- For kids like me, it's pupils and teachers...there's no *relationship*. So, it's not like you can talk to them when you need anything. I just don't have that kind of relationship with any teacher.

(Zoe, St John's)

Zoe had turned to her older sister for advice when researching degrees in Sports Science. Her sister had also accompanied her to university open days. However, Zoe's sister was away at university by the time Zoe came to write her personal statement. In addition, her form tutor rarely 'bother[ed] to turn up' for the weekly Life Skills periods, when HE applicants worked on their UCAS applications. Zoe's search for someone to help her with the drafting of her personal statement was a stressful one. She described finally locating her form tutor in an art room during one lunch hour. When Zoe asked for some feedback on her personal statement, Zoe said her form tutor 'snapped at' her:

She said, 'No, *you* have to write it. I can't do anything apart from tell you 'That's wrong'. But the thing is, I don't know what to put in...but they just say, 'Well, we can't tell you'.

(Zoe, St John's)

Zoe was tearful when she described her form tutor's response. She was also angered by the implication that she wanted her form tutor to write her personal statement for her. Zoe came across as one of a group of 'aggrieved' moderate attainers. She believed that St John's only recognised 'smart' students. Her failure to get help for her personal statement appeared symptomatic of all the other times county hockey player, Zoe, felt unrecognised by St John's.

In a similar way to Zoe, Ella came across as aggrieved over the unfairness of St John's prioritising of high attaining students. Ella described the 'huge separation' between those who got help from teachers with their personal statements at St John's and those who did not. She explained the challenge of writing a personal statement:

They take a lot of work to get right. They're not fun. Generally, they're not easy to write - just in terms of stress levels. And there isn't the help for some of us. There's a huge separation between people they help and those they don't...

(Ella, St John's)

Amy admitted she found writing her personal statement 'really difficult'. When I asked if she had asked her form tutor for help, Amy was evasive. I learnt later that Amy's form tutor was new to the role of sixth form tutor. Although emotionally supportive of Amy, she had little experience of advising students with their UCAS applications. Amy seemed anxious about appearing critical of the amount of help Oxbridge students received:

I know Oxbridge is hard, and what they have to do to get in is much harder...but still, they get all this stuff like critical thinking, interview practice and then loads of help from [Mr Brothers] for their personal statement...I'm not given *any* of those sort of things. (*Nervous laugh*) I don't know...I don't know what they're wanting me to do...to be really honest, I don't know...(*trailing off*)

(Amy, St John's)

During a group interview, Jennie, a moderately attaining friend of Amy's, echoed Amy's feelings:

We never get anything to put on our personal statement. Top students get everything; they have loads to put on theirs.

(Jennie, Hallingford)

Unlike Zoe, who was angry about the lack of help she was given, Amy and Jennie appeared confused about the unfairness in the way resources were distributed. Amy's repeated use of 'I don't know' suggested her bewilderment over how to write a personal statement. Jennie's frustration over the unfairness of high attainers having 'loads to put on theirs' suggested her awareness of the kind of enhancement and opportunities made available to high attainers. At St John's, like Hallingford, only high attainers attended external events and courses designed to enhance their HE applications.

When I asked St John's moderate attainer, Benny, about the kind of support he had received for his UCAS application, he responded by talking about the lack of support he was given for his personal statement. He explained that there had been 'all sorts of talks' and complained, '...but you hear the same stuff over and over again.' When I asked Benny about the type of 'stuff' these talks featured, all Benny could recall was that he should use paragraphs. On further questioning, Benny appeared to be referring to presentations given during St John's year 12 UCAS day. Benny told me that he and his friends had talked about the disparity in levels of support for the personal statement:

Some of my friends and me in my [Design Technology] class were thinking about this, because none of us are in the Oxbridge Group, and we were all saying it, that [Oxbridge applicants] get all these workshops...and they get all the help from [Mr Brothers] too...and we haven't been given anything like that.

(Benny, St John's)

Benny felt that students like him were given 'talks' instead of the personalised support high attainers were given. One to one support was something which Benny and all St John's moderate attainers complained they lacked. Benny had girlfriends in the Oxbridge Group, two of whom helped him with his personal statement:

They get all this stuff... [friend] told me that they get to take their personal statement to [Mr Brothers] every day, if they want to, and get bits changed and stuff, and really we don't have that. I don't think it's fair, really (*nervous laugh*). I know we could go to one of the teachers but if you're not applying to top places, you have to keep asking and nagging...we're sort of *looked over*...they forget about us and concentrate on Oxbridge [applicants].

(Benny, St John's)

I sensed from Benny's use of 'nagging' and from moderate attainers' accounts of having to ask for help at both St John's and Hallingford, that students found it humiliating to have to 'keep asking' for help from teachers and were put off approaching them. The unfairness was compounded by the fact that St John's moderate attainers were fully aware of the higher levels of support high attaining students received from Oxbridge tutor, Mr Brothers.

'We're still waiting...'

Although moderate attainer, Vicky progressed to an apprenticeship, she considered going to university and made a UCAS application. I asked Vicky if anyone at St John's had helped her with her personal statement:

No-one...no, no-one...no teachers. A couple of weeks ago my form tutor asked to read our personal statements and a load of us handed them in, but she hasn't read them...but then I don't think she's done UCAS before. Thing is, we've got two weeks to go before we have to submit them [UCAS applications] and we're still waiting for our feedback. I know it's our responsibility...like, we should chase her...but you'd think if she *cared*...

(Vicky, St John's)

Vicky appeared hurt when she described her form tutor's apparent lack of care. Other moderate attainers complained more explicitly about the unfairness in the way support was distributed. As Benny pointed out, the prioritising of 'top' students meant moderate attainers were 'looked over' and their needs not recognised. Patrick took a more philosophical view. Compared to other moderate attainers, Patrick came across as especially self-sufficient. Unable to find a teacher with relevant subject knowledge of degrees in Computer Science to advise him on his HE choices, Patrick undertook extensive independent research, which included several university visits. The only teacher Patrick approached for help was his Economics teacher, Oxford Group tutor, Mr Brothers, whom Patrick approached for advice on his personal statement:

He said it was fine (*laughs*)...but he just flicked over it – it was pretty obvious he didn't bother reading it...I suppose he's busy...

(Patrick, St John's)

Patrick's observation about Mr Brothers being too 'busy' to offer any constructive advice on his personal statement may have been true. However, Mr Brothers' approach to helping Patrick contrasted strongly with the support given to Oxbridge applicants. I was able to observe two of Mr Brother's Oxbridge tutorials. In one of these, I observed how Ruth and 11 other students were encouraged to come up with ideas for their personal statement, advised on how to make their personal statement 'stand out', and supported by Mr Brothers while writing an initial draft. As students wrote, Mr Brothers circulated the classroom, giving advice and personalised feedback. In addition to the Oxbridge tutorials, students met with Mr Brothers individually to discuss their personal statements. Higher attainer Ruth talked to me

about the intensive support she received, describing a back and forth process in which Ruth produced and Mr Brothers edited successive drafts. The drafting continued until Ruth and Mr Brothers were both satisfied.⁸⁵ I asked Ruth if she could recall how many drafts she had made of her personal statement, she responded:

A lot!...about 10...(pauses) actually, probably more. I took each of them back to Mr Brothers. He suggested getting rid of all the personal stuff. With later drafts, it was helping me to re-word sentences so that it made more sense, and that kind of thing ...like how I could be more specific about my interest in organic chemistry. (...//) My mum did Chemistry at King's so she read over it and helped, and my friend's sister went to Oxford and she read it as well. That was really useful, getting an actual Oxbridge student to help...she knew what kind of language they'd expect, and words not to use...like 'enthusiasm'...everybody says they're 'enthusiastic' or 'passionate' about their subject, but that doesn't say anything anymore, because everyone uses it. It was a much better personal statement than if I had done it by myself.

(Ruth, St John's)

Ruth's final comment calls into question how far her personal statement could be said to be her own work (Schwartz, 2004, p.26). Further, Ruth's description of her mother's help points to the value of having a university educated family member when making a UCAS application (Reay et al, 2005, p.62). In addition to the weekly support Ruth got as part of St John's Oxbridge Group, she benefited from a valuable combination of school 'sponsorship' and the enhanced cultural and social capital of her family.

The value of a university educated parent

The value of having a familial habitus which includes graduate parent(s) for middle class students making their HE choices has been well researched (Reay, 1998; Ball et al 2002b; Brooks, 2002; Reay, 1998; David et al, 2003; Power, Edwards, Whitty and Wigfall, 2003; Reay et al, 2005). In addition, a small body of work highlights concerns expressed by universities' admissions staff over teacher and parental

⁸⁵ The exhaustive drafting process brought to mind Benny's description of high attainers 'just bang out the work' (see Chapter 5).

involvement in student's personal statements (Schwartz, 2004; Candy, 2013; Jones, 2012). However, the *extent* of parental support would appear under-researched. St John's, graduate mothers were heavily involved in the drafting of their children's personal statements. At Hallingford, only high attainer Sumeer had a mother who was a graduate of an English university. However, as a mature student from a 'new' university with a degree in adult nursing, Sumeer did not feel his mother's HE knowledge was relevant for his own HE choices. High attainer, Asmit, and moderate attainers Neena, Shafia and Tim, all had older sisters at university. Only Neena was helped with her personal statement by her sister.

Three out of the six moderately attaining St John's students who applied to HE had a university educated parent who helped them with their personal statements. Two, Ella and Patrick, were helped by mothers (see David et al, 2003) who were graduates of 'new' universities. Benny's father attended the LSE. Moderate attainers, Amy and Zoe both lacked a graduate family background. Without school and home support, Amy and Zoe appeared to struggle most with the writing of their personal statements.

Ella's disillusionment with the lack of support she received from St John's during the HE process was reinforced when she submitted her UCAS application early, only to be told she had to wait for Oxbridge applicants to be processed before her application could be submitted. Ella was still angry, several weeks later. She knew the Oxbridge deadline was earlier than for other universities but felt that St John's prioritising of Oxbridge applicants was 'wrong', pointing out St John's was a state school, 'not Eton'. It is possible Ella's bitterness was exacerbated by her failure to find anyone at St John's willing to help her with the drafting of her personal statement. She described her hurt when a teacher she considered 'a friend' took her personal statement and 'only gave it a quick look'. Ella had turned to her mother. She became emotional when describing her mother's support:

I was pleased with my personal statement...My mum wrote it with me. No-one here helped me, I'm just another piece of paper...but I couldn't have done it without my mum. I honestly could not have done it without my mum. [...//]. Even some of my friends came to my mum for advice...

(Ella, St John's)

Ella's heartfelt appreciation of the emotional and practical support her mother gave her during the drafting process was evident. Ella also appeared proud that her mother, a teacher of BTEC Nursery Nursing at another school, was able to provide support for friends who, like her, had failed to find support from St John's teachers. Patrick was another moderate attainer who turned to his graduate mother after Mr Brothers 'flicked over' his personal statement. Patrick explained,

Mum's pretty good at English and she helped me to edit it, but other than mum, there was no-one...(pause) but then I don't think they're really bothered (laughs).

(Patrick, St John's)

When I asked Patrick to clarify his last comment, he told me 'Well, they're obviously bothered with Oxbridge...'. Patrick's comment suggested he was aware of the disparity in the levels given to Oxbridge applicants and other HE applicants. It is possible that Mr Brothers was, as Patrick supposed, too 'busy' to help all students. An alternative explanation was that Mr Brothers reserved his time and effort for high attainers. In this way, Mr Brothers' behaviour would seem to resemble that of Hallingford's Mr Nelson whose selective approach to helping HE applicants was described by both moderate and high attainers.

Unusually for a St John's moderate attainer, Benny was helped with his personal statement by both a Russell Group graduate parent and by high attaining friends. Benny did not trust that his form tutor had the necessary expertise to advise him on his UCAS application. His father was especially helpful when Benny was researching degree courses in robotics and mechatronics.⁸⁶

⁸⁶ Mechatronics combines the study of electronic and mechanical engineering.

My dad helped me quite a bit. There was no-one at school, really. I don't think my form tutor's best suited...she obviously doesn't know as much as dad and me about mechatronics. Dad found all the HE fairs I went to...and we looked at websites and stuff together. He helped me start my personal statement and then he checked it...all of it, really. I'd always ask Dad what he thinks.

(Benny, St John's)

The support Benny described receiving from his father appeared comparable to the level of support high attainers Ruth and Katie described receiving from their graduate parents. As Reay (1998) points out, there are 'cultural capital differences between different fragments of the middle classes' (p.522). Without further study, I can only make the tentative suggestion from accounts given by St John's students with graduate parents, that there is a relationship between the type of university a parent attended and the level of support they were able to give with the personal statement. Reay (1998) also shows how access to certain types of cultural and social capital allows students with university educated parents to supplement support prescribed by a school's habitus (p.522). In my study, it did seem that the help given by graduate parents to moderate attainers went some way towards compensating for the lack of school support. However, the two highest attainers in my sample, Oxbridge applicants Katie and Ruth, also received supplementary support of a very high order from their Russell Group educated parents. Both girls had access to the family's 'hot' knowledge of Oxbridge and social networks which included Oxbridge graduates. It seems unfair that schools like St John's should invest so disproportionately in already advantaged high attainers such as Katie and Ruth. Most significantly, the same students who lacked the support of graduate parents, such as Amy and Zoe, were also the least likely to be helped by their school.

Out of a total of 12 St John's HE applicants, 11 progressed to university. Only Patrick, a 'high end' moderate attainer did not progress to his first-choice university.⁸⁷

⁸⁷ See Table 15 for a reminder of all St John's HE applicants and their final destinations

Support for Parklands' moderate attainers

High and moderately attaining HE applicants at Parklands in my sample all benefited from the support of a subject specialist who advised on their HE choices and gave support for the drafting of their personal statements. The benefits of highly educated teachers in possession of enhanced cultural capital and 'hot' knowledge about degree courses could be seen most clearly in the support given to Oxbridge applicants and to two moderate attainers' applications in the creative arts. Musician Danny and actor Zac, both made 'untypical' HE applications in a school where the majority of boys progressed to Russell Group institutions. At the time of my research, 95% of Parklands year 13 boys progressed to a Russell Group university.

Jazz drummer Danny's application to a 'second league' (Danny) music college required a drumming audition as well as a personal statement. Danny explained that his drumming teacher, Mr Ludwig, a part-time music teacher was also a highly respected professional drummer who played for well-known rock and jazz bands. Danny said Mr Ludwig was a 'jazz nut' and 'knew the scene'. Not only did Mr Ludwig advise him on his choice of college but he helped Danny choose his audition pieces and gave Danny intensive coaching for his auditions. In addition, a member of Parklands' Music Department supported Danny with 'all the academic stuff', such as sight-reading tests and his personal statement. Similarly, Zac described being coached for his auditions for degree courses in Drama and Theatre by Parklands' Head of Drama, Mr McCann who, in addition to teaching, wrote and directed plays professionally. It was while being coached by Mr McCann that Zac discovered he could sing and dance. Mr McCann and drama teacher, Miss Reece, also helped Zac with the drafting of his personal statement. The enthusiasm with which both Danny and Zac spoke about the help they were given for their HE applications matched high attainer Gerald's description of his preparation for Oxbridge and moderate attainer Rishi's description of the support he was given by Parklands' subject specialist for English Language, Mr Cartwright. Rishi's personal statement went through several drafts with Mr Cartwright advising him throughout: 'Whenever I needed something he was always like there. If I needed help to go through something then he literally like created time for me to see him.' (Rishi).

Out of the 13 students tracked to their post school destinations one moderate attainer and one high attainer did not attain the grades for their first-choice universities. Both progressed to their insurance choices. Of the three moderate attainers who left Parklands at the end of year 12, one found his university place through Clearing and one did not attain the grades for his first or insurance HE choices and decided to look for an apprenticeship.⁸⁸

Preparation for Oxbridge – a comparison of three schools

I have argued that the influence of teacher habitus could be seen in teachers who acted as facilitators or gatekeepers for moderate attainers' HE applications. Although moderate attainers are the focus of this thesis, the influence of teacher and institutional habituses on students' Oxbridge applications in each of my three schools offered some useful insights; in particular, for the preparation given to high attainers for their Oxbridge interview. It seems important to consider the effectiveness of Oxbridge preparation, but only because the intensive coaching given to high attainers appeared to be at the expense of support given to other HE applicants.

I observed a mock Oxbridge interview at Parklands and two Oxbridge Group tutorials at St John's. There was no officially allocated time for the coaching of Oxbridge applicants at Hallingford. Students arranged time with senior teachers for help with their personal statement and/or for interview practice at mutually convenient times. There were also mock interviews conducted by teachers at another school. I did not learn about these interviews until after they had taken place. My discussion of Oxbridge preparation in each of my three sixth forms is therefore based on what I observed and from students' own accounts.

Hallingford – let down by the 'exam factory'

Hallingford high attainer Fahima told me she felt 'ill-prepared' for her Oxbridge interview. This was in spite of intensive coaching given by Mr Nelson and a mock interview conducted by a teacher at independent school 'Sydney's', with whom Hallingford ran its 'Supper Society' for high attainers.⁸⁹ Fahima told me that from

⁸⁸ See Table 16 for a reminder of all Parklands' students' university choices.

⁸⁹ See Chapter 5.

what she observed while on interview she did not believe it was the case that Oxford 'prefers private school kids'. She explained:

It's more that private school kids speak the same language [.../] Private school kids are taught in a way that makes the interview easier...like, it's more natural for them to talk like that. Nobody at [Hallingford] can teach in that way – it's an exam factory. A lot of our teachers are young and just aren't the same...they aren't able to talk to us in the right way [.../] Except Miss Williams...Miss Williams can teach in the way Oxbridge requires. But then she went to Cambridge...

(Fahima, Hallingford)

Fahima's observations suggested a sophisticated understanding of what was required in the Oxbridge interview, and what it was she had lacked as a direct result of Hallingford's instrumental approach to teaching.⁹⁰ When Fahima described the type of questions she was asked, she said she could not think of any Hallingford teacher, other than Miss Williams, who could 'think conceptually like that'. Fahima appeared to recognise that Miss Williams possessed the right *type* of cultural capital to teach a student who aspired to Oxbridge. High attainer Sumeer, described senior teachers Miss Williams and Mr Austen in a way which indicated he believed they possessed a type of cultural capital which put them 'in another league' (Sumeer) when compared to other Hallingford teachers.

St John's – 'nothing like' the Cambridge interview

In addition to Mr Brothers' weekly Oxbridge Group meetings, St John's students are prepared for Oxbridge with a mock interview conducted by the Head of school, Mr Daniels. Miss Harrison, (Head of Sixth Form, Mrs Jay's assistant) explained, 'Our Head, Mr Daniels, likes to do the mock interviews himself. I think he feels...(pause) well, he went to Cambridge, didn't he?' Ruth and Katie's accounts suggested Mr Daniels may have assumed a particular persona was necessary to conduct their mock interviews. Miss Harrison told me that Ruth had found her mock interview so

⁹⁰ Hallingford employs a highly successful Gillborn and Youdell (2000) style system of setting and rationing of resources at GCSE. The school regularly tops local GCSE league tables for GCSE but ranks less highly for A levels.

distressing that afterwards she had come to the sixth form office and burst into tears. In interview, Ruth was embarrassed about her reaction. She seemed anxious not to criticise Mr Daniels but thought he had been 'a bit over the top'. Katie said her interview had 'gone on and on'. Both told me their mock interviews were 'nothing like' their Cambridge interviews. In spite of Mr Daniels' ferocity, he had asked Ruth only 'very general questions'; and her Chemistry teacher, Miss Hutchings, who assisted Mr Daniels with the mock interview, asked Ruth 'simple opinion questions on things like climate change'. Ruth explained,

Basically, they asked questions that I would be expected to know the answers to straight away (...//) It wasn't like what the real interview was like *at all*.

(Ruth, St John's)

Ruth's experience suggested St John's teachers were unaware of what was required for an Oxbridge interview and possibly also, the standard of applications. In spite of her status as one of St John's highest attainers and weekly attendance of Mr Brothers' Oxbridge Group, Ruth said she struggled with the some of the questioning. Katie admitted she could not do the 'thinking skills paper' candidates were set.

Parklands – 'He prepared me brilliantly'

The types of academic and cultural capital possessed by many Parklands teachers meant that they were in a particularly strong position to support boys' applications to Russell Group universities, and especially Oxbridge. The school's staff includes mostly Russell Group graduates and many are Oxbridge graduates. Gerald's preparation for his interview to read Law at Oxford was indicative of the thoroughness of the support and guidance from which Parklands' boys benefited for their university applications. Gerald explained that Parklands Head of Careers, Mrs Pearson, insists all boys who have had an Oxbridge interview complete a feedback form in which they record the questions they were asked, and anything else about the format of their interview which might help future interviewees. Parklands Careers department has an extensive file for each subject which may be consulted by any student called for an Oxbridge interview. Mr Gabriel, the subject specialist for Law,

studied Law at Cambridge and practised at the Bar before training to be a teacher.⁹¹ As Parklands' subject specialist for Law, Mr Gabriel, is responsible for supervising the personal statements of all students applying to read Law. In addition, Oxbridge students applying for Law are coached by Mr Gabriel for interview. Students may choose who conducts their in-school mock interviews but usually this is done by senior teachers. Members of staff responsible for conducting mock Oxbridge interviews while I was conducting research in Parklands, included the school's Head of History, a Cambridge graduate with both a double first and doctorate in History, and the school's Deputy Head of Sixth Form, Dr Tremain, a former lecturer in Philosophy at a leading Russell Group university. Following their mock interviews with a member of Parklands staff, students are also given a mock interview by a teacher from another selective independent school with whom Parklands has an arrangement. Gerald's description of the help he received from Mr Gabriel for his personal statement and Oxbridge interview was enthusiastic:

A really great thing that the school does is I could look at a file with all the things [Oxbridge] had asked in interviews for Law, over the years. It was *really* helpful. I was asked about various aspects of law, and I was well prepped on those. [...//]. One of my questions was about whether Roman Law was applicable now - because I had written about my interest in Roman law in my personal statement, and that I was really interested in the intricacies of the Roman World. When [Mr Gabriel] read that, he said, 'If you're going to write *that*, then you are going to need *this*.' And he took down this book from his bookshelf and, you know, blew off the dust (*laughs*), and said, 'Read the first and last chapters'; and, literally, a question came up in my interview which was straight out of the last chapter. That was how I was able to answer it. Incredible! He [Mr Gabriel] prepared me *brilliantly*.

(Gerald, Parklands)

⁹¹ See Chapter 4 where I describe Mr Gabriel's UCAS day workshop.

Ultimately, Gerald was unsuccessful. Summing up his experience of applying to Oxford, he said, 'I was extraordinarily well prepared throughout. The school's been brilliant.'

Candy (2013) states that one of the many reasons for the disproportionate number of independent school students accessing Russell Group universities 'relates to preparation' and points out that some schools 'have become extremely effective at preparing their pupils for successful access to elite university routes' (p.9).

Hallingford and St John's invested heavily in their Oxbridge applicants for small returns. Nonetheless, neither school could match the kind of advantages that came with Parklands' institutional habitus, and the types of academic and cultural capital possessed by its teachers, so useful for preparing Oxbridge applicants. Out of 270 year 13 students, 20 Hallingford students were coached for Oxbridge, 15 of whom were called for interview. Two were offered places, both of whom turned down their offers (see Chapter 5). At St John's, out of 145 year 13 students, 12 were coached for Oxbridge and five were called for interview. Two were offered places and progressed to Cambridge. One of these students left after a term.

Senior teachers' perspectives

St John's

St John's Head of Sixth Form Mrs Jay was uncomfortable with level of investment in St John's higher attaining students and their applications to 'elite' universities, and believed it was excessive. She told me she had fought and lost a battle to disband the sixth form G&T group which some high attainers attended in addition to Oxbridge Group. It appeared that Mrs Jay's initiatives to re-distribute resources so that more students were properly supported with their post-school choosing challenged senior management's ambitions. A member of staff told me 'The Head's told [Mrs Jay] she's got to get more into Oxbridge'. Mrs Jay's autonomy appeared to be constrained by Assistant Head, Mr Reid, who oversaw the provision of support for HE. I was given to understand by Mrs Jay that Mr Reid took a special interest in Oxbridge applicants.

In interview, I asked Mr Reid about the disparity in the levels of support given to Oxbridge applicants and other HE applicants. I cited high attaining students who

described the extent of the support they received for their UCAS applications, which included one to one help with their personal statement. I explained that non-Russell Group applicants reported difficulty getting help with their personal statements. Mr Reid told me:

It depends who you ask. Some students might claim things like that. Look, everything is available if they want it; it's all out there, on the internet, and our [sixth form website]. We expect them to be pro-active.

I also asked Mr Reid why Oxbridge students were taken in the school mini bus on two-day trips to Oxford and Cambridge while other students had to arrange and pay for their own travel to visit universities. At this point, Mr Reid became exasperated:

It *sounds* like [Oxbridge applicants] get the most help. It *sounds* like it because of the way you asked...and in that sense, yes...they do...but then Sociology took students to a lecture up in London recently, I seem to recall. It *sounds* like some students get the most help. Yes, it sounds like that because that's *your* headline, if you like, but I don't think *necessarily* they always do. I think, equally, for some of those things they need more support because to go to Oxford or Cambridge, or to study medicine, you need to do other exams. You're not just doing your A levels you've got to do something additional.

(Mr Reid, St John's)⁹²

Mr Reid's frequent use of 'sounds like', which he kept stressing, gave me the impression that he wished to make clear things were not as they sounded from students' accounts.

Hallingford

In my interview with Hallingford Head of Sixth Form Mr Nelson, we were joined by his deputy, Mr Windsor. Until Mr Windsor left, any attempt to ask direct questions about levels of support for the HE process were deflected with Mr Nelson's use of

⁹² My field note describes my discomfiture here. I had the distinct impression Mr Reid was suggesting that I was posing questions phrased in order to trick him into giving a misleading impression of the levels of support given to different groups of students for the HE process.

humour. Referring to practices I had seen in other schools, I asked about practices which saw high attainers receiving more support during the HE process than students applying, for example, to Derby University. I asked Mr Nelson whether he thought the same ‘kind of thing’ occurred at Hallingford.

Mr Nelson Well, we have students who quite clearly don’t have the grades to get into the universities that we want them to go to...and then I say...
(*bursts out laughing*) ‘You have to go to Derby or de Montfort.’ (*Mr Windsor joins in the laughter*) And they say, ‘Why would I want to go there? You’ve told us they’re no good.’

NMB (*I talk over continued laughter*) So what do you do then?

Mr Nelson (*Calming down, more serious*) I remind them that actually, Derby and de Montfort aren’t too bad and you’re only getting Bs and Cs, (*pause*) which is a sad state of affairs, isn’t it?

Employing Mr Nelson’s own terminology for his sixth formers, I asked him directly if he believed Hallingford’s ‘elites’ received more help with their UCAS applications than the ‘B’ students. Mr Nelson’s good humour disappeared and in tone which made it clear to me he wished to move on from the issue, he told me that if students got their UCAS applications in to him on time, he checked them. I gained the impression from my interview with Mr Nelson, as I had done from my interviews with moderately attaining students and some of the teachers at Hallingford, that the destinations of moderate attainers applying to ‘new’ universities were marginal to Mr Nelson’s aspirations for his sixth form.

Parklands

When I asked Mrs Pearson, the Head of Parklands Careers Department about the amount, and quality, of support Parklands students were given for their university applications she pointed out that as a fee-paying school, ‘It’s what our parents expect’. I also asked Mrs Pearson about her response to claims that schools like Parklands had an unfair advantage when it came to making applications to ‘elite’ universities. Mrs Pearson responded by explaining that ‘elite’ universities attempted to ‘level the playing field’. She said that typical Oxbridge offers for Parklands boys were A*AA, and sometimes A*A*A. Mrs Pearson’s conversations with Oxbridge

admissions tutors led her to understand that Parklands applicants were assessed on past attainment, while state school applicants were assessed on their future potential. She felt this was ‘only fair’. I put it to Mrs Pearson that some people believed that independent schools had a ‘hot line’ to Oxbridge colleges and could pull on contacts to get their students accepted. Mrs Pearson strongly denied this. She explained:

There are parents, yes, who think they can get the Head to ring up, you know? And some silly boys ask me to...you know, when they fail to get in to Oxbridge...they say things like, ‘You know such a body...will you ring him up...can’t you do something?’ And I tell them, ‘I can’t! And even if I could, I *wouldn’t* do that’.

Concluding thoughts

The levels of support for students who aspired to HE at Hallingford and St John’s were differentiated at every stage of the HE process; however, it was in the amount of teacher time given to students for their personal statements that this differentiation could be seen most clearly. In both schools, a disproportionate amount of teacher time, given by senior teachers, was invested in the personal statements of Oxbridge applicants.

At both schools, moderately attaining students applying to ‘new’ universities, were marginalised, owing to intrinsic weaknesses in the way support for students’ UCAS applications was delivered. A fundamental weakness appeared to lie in giving the responsibility of supervising up to 25 students’ UCAS applications to a single teacher, in addition to teaching responsibilities and responsibility for the pastoral care of their students. It seemed possible that hard-pressed teachers were having to make choices about where to invest time. Nonetheless, it was apparent from my study that students most in need of guidance with the drafting of their personal statements were the least likely to receive support from their form tutor. Conversely, Hallingford and St John’s highest attainers, who might be expected to manage their UCAS applications independently, received such extensive support for the drafting of their personal statements that these could not be said to be their own work.

Support given to Hallingford and St John’s highest attainers appeared to reflect how badly a school wished to facilitate a student’s access to Oxbridge. The heavy

investment by graduate parents *and* school into the personal statements of two St John's high attainers must raise questions about the validity of the personal statement as a constituent part of a student's university application. In the same way, it is questionable why Hallingford teachers felt the need to support high attainers so intensively when these students received 'hot' knowledge and constructive advice on personal statement writing while attending Sutton Trust courses. In addition, the high levels of support given to fee-paying Parklands' high and moderate attainers for their personal statements does seem, as others have suggested (Jones, 2012; Candy 2013), that the personal statement is more a reflection of the quality of support given to students than an accurate reflection of their 'personal' attributes. As Jones (2012) also suggests, rather than an 'instrument of fairness', the personal statement appears 'to extend existing school-based inequities into higher education' (p.8). My study indicates that these inequities exist both across school types and *within* non-selective state schools anxious to boost the chances of their high attaining students' access to Oxbridge.

The levels of support given to Hallingford and St John's high attainers' for their personal statements appeared sufficiently good to get students over the 'first hurdle' of an Oxbridge application and invited to interview. However, preparation for the Oxbridge interview appeared ill-informed at Hallingford and St John's. Hallingford's Fahima suggested her school's instrumental approach to teaching, coupled with the school's mostly young, inexperienced teachers, were detrimental to preparing potential Oxbridge applicants. As can be seen at Parklands, the influence of teacher and institutional habitus may greatly facilitate access to Oxbridge. However, equally, a school's institutional and/or a teacher's habitus may ultimately 'gatekeep' students' access (Oliver and Kettley, 2010). The failure of Hallingford and St John's students to access Oxbridge is only partly attributable to the type of coaching given to applicants. If Hallingford's Fahima's observations about her school as an 'exam factory' are correct, it seems possible that a systemic weakness in the state education system is also responsible; specifically, policies which focus on outcomes (results) rather than pedagogy. In such a system, the 'force feeding' of teacher time and other resources into high attainers at sixth form level appears an ineffective and wasteful approach to boosting access to 'elite' universities.

Preparation for Oxbridge only matters in a thesis primarily concerned with moderately attaining sixth formers because of Oxbridge's power to seduce schools into such unfair practices when distributing resources for all HE applicants. Only three out of eight moderately attaining Hallingford students managed to find a teacher willing to read properly and check, let alone guide them through the writing of their personal statements. The help given to students by senior teacher Mr Austen and form tutor Mr Riley, highlighted the importance of a teacher habitus characterised by a more socially just approach to supporting HE applicants. As Naz pointed out, Mr Austen's willingness to help him with his personal statement was *despite* Naz not being an Oxbridge applicant. Both Mr Austen and Mr Riley appeared motivated to circumnavigate Hallingford's HE discourse and the focus on selective universities in order to facilitate moderately attaining students' HE applications.

Form tutors with a socially just approach to supporting moderate attainers HE applications were not found during my research in St John's, and all six moderately attaining HE applicants failed to access any school support for the drafting of their personal statements.⁹³ For three moderate attainers, having a graduate parent helped to mitigate against the lack of support given by their school, and a supportive non-graduate mother and grandfather helped moderate attainer Vicky with her personal statement.

At Hallingford, moderate attainers complained less about the unfairness of the distribution in resources which privileged their attaining peers than the teachers who failed to help them. Arguably, Hallingford moderate attainers helped by high attaining friends who had attended Sutton Trust courses benefited from 'hot' knowledge that was as good (if not more up to date and relevant) than that possessed by St John's students helped by graduate parents. In addition, it seemed Hallingford's friendship groups, which crossed attainment and ethno-cultural boundaries, encouraged a supportive and positive student culture. Students overlooked by teachers were more likely to have friends who wanted to help them. At the more monocultural St John's, students appeared to mix within their social class and/or attainment groupings. As a result, working class moderate attainers such

⁹³ Head of Sixth Form, Mrs Jay, wrote UCAS references for moderate attainers, Amy and Vicky.

as Amy and Zoe, who both lacked a graduate family background and who also failed to access help from teachers for the drafting of their personal statements, came across as the most disadvantaged of all the moderate attainers who took part in this study.

Hallingford's more mutually supportive student culture meant that although high attainers were grateful for the level of support they received, they also questioned its fairness. When high attainers Asmit, Fahima and Kirti helped their friends with their personal statements, they effectively re-distributed the resources from which they had benefited. In this way, it can be argued that Hallingford high attainers had a sense of fairness akin to the 'social justice agenda' (Oliver and Kettley, 2010) evident in the levels of support given to moderate attainers by Mr Austen and Mr Riley. Although, superficially, Hallingford and St John's shared very similar HE discourses, aspects of these schools' institutional habituses made it possible for Hallingford's HE discourse to be circumnavigated by some students and teachers, but less so at St John's. Significantly, St John's high attainers were ignorant of the levels of support given to moderate attainers for their HE applications. This would seem to confirm the lack of fluidity between class and/or attainment groupings. Benny alone was helped by two high attaining girlfriends who he knew from his youth orchestra. However, their friendship only seemed possible because it existed outside the context of St John's.

Finally, the drafting of the personal statement appeared to be a far more emotional experience for moderate attainers than for high attainers. Emotions ranged from Patrick and Zane's resignation over senior teachers being 'too busy' to help them to the anger and hurt expressed by St John's moderate attainer Zoe over the injustice of seeing high attainers 'mollycoddled'. Only three out of a total 15 moderately attaining HE applicants found teachers who took an interest in their personal statements. Their positive experiences stood out among the many tales of frustration, humiliation and hurt described by Hallingford and St John's moderate attainers. Teachers who gave time and constructive support to students who were not applying to Russell Group universities were exceptional in this study.

CHAPTER 7

Support for students who chose alternatives to HE

'It's all focused on university, university, university, all the time'

(Stacey, Hallingford)

Introduction

During the course of my research in Hallingford and St John's, several moderate attainers expressed interest in alternatives to HE. This made them 'non-conformers' in the context of sixth forms where they were expected and actively encouraged to progress to HE. Having a graduate sibling who was either under-employed or unemployed (see Britton et al, 2016) and in debt, and/or the cost of university, were the most common reasons given by students who questioned the wisdom of HE.⁹⁴ I include students who left school for college at the end of year 12 among the ten 'non-conformers' in this study. Of the two Hallingford moderate attainers who left school at the end of year 12, one progressed to an apprenticeship and one to college. At St John's, three moderate attainers left at the end of year 12. Two went to college and one to an apprenticeship. In addition, one Hallingford and two St John's moderate attainers went on to an apprenticeship at the end of year 13.

In the sections that follow, I present the experiences of non-conformers as told by the students themselves. First, I present some of the reasons students gave for their uncertainty over university. This is followed by a discussion of the experiences of those who decided to leave school at the end of year 12. I then examine the emotional impact of being a non-conformer in a school which valorises progression to HE. In particular, I examine some of the coping strategies employed by non-conformers in schools which 'push' students towards university. In my final sections, I discuss how Hallingford and St John's have responded to the rise in student interest in apprenticeships. I conclude with examples of form tutors whose

⁹⁴ Under-employed i.e. in low-skilled jobs or jobs that do not require a degree.

particular teacher habitus (Oliver and Kettley, 2010) enabled them to provide practical and emotional support for non-conformers with their post-school choosing.

Three moderately attaining Parklands students left for sixth form college at the end of year 12 to continue with A levels. Two further moderate attainers aspired to degrees in the creative arts and did not conform to the particular HE discourse of their selective academic school. However, only Hallingford and St John's non-conformers expressed interest in alternatives to university. For this reason, no Parklands students are included in this chapter.

Reasons for choosing an alternative to HE

Seven out of the ten Hallingford and St John's non-conformers wanted to pursue an apprenticeship when they left school. Of these, one was still applying for apprenticeships a year after my research was completed and one had accepted a management position in a shop. Students wishing to study for a Higher Apprenticeship (HA) usually require a Level 3 qualification in the form of BTECs, Applied A levels and/or A levels. Industries in which non-conformers hoped to secure apprenticeships included finance, beauty, engineering and the music industry. Students most interested in HAs at Hallingford and St John's were white, working-class students whose attainment placed them at the lower end of moderate attainment. However, non-conformers also included a working-class South Asian and two working class Black boys. Typically, non-conformers were predicted BBC/BCC at A level. One Hallingford moderate attainer was predicted CDD. The strong focus on progression to HE in both schools meant students whose A level predictions included Cs and Ds were also expected to progress to university.

A small number of non-conformers cited an under-employed or unemployed graduate older sibling as their reason for not progressing to HE. St John's Memphis had an older brother who gained a BA in Audio and Music Production and was still looking for work a year after graduating. Erica's sister studied for a degree in Fashion Marketing at Cardiff Metropolitan University and worked in a travel agency. At Hallingford, Stacey's brother studied Criminology at Leeds University and worked as a letting agent. Stacey's friend, Danni, had an older sister who studied Law at Buckingham, and was employed as an optician's assistant in Boots. These

students all questioned the wisdom of university. Stacey and Erica felt university was a ‘waste of money’ and Simon suspected university was ‘one expensive party’. Two moderate attainers, Hari and Vicky, applied to university but progressed to apprenticeships believing they offered better prospects than a degree.

Hallingford form tutor Mr Riley, described the conflict he felt over encouraging ‘clever kids’ from working class and ethnic minority backgrounds to apply to university only to discover they have progressed into unskilled work:

Students I’ve taught are now graduated and have a job. I see lots of them around and I say ‘So, what are you doing?’ and they go, ‘I work in a shoe shop’ or ‘I’m a security guard’...and these are clever kids [*long pause*] that we’ve pushed into university, into a degree, but now those graduates are saddled with tremendous debt...

(Mr Riley, Hallingford)

In an IFS working paper on graduate earnings, Britton et al (2016) found a correlation between family background, subject studied and the type of institution attended. They found that graduates from lower income households typically earn 60% less than their peers from higher income households ‘long after graduation’ (Britton et al, 2016, p.55). Some moderate attainers, such as Amy and Ella at St John’s, and Hallingford’s Adela and Zane, expressed interest in alternatives to HE but ultimately chose university. Of this group, Adela expressed some anxiety about student debt; however, she and Amy both believed a university degree would lead to a better job. Although Hari (Hallingford) and Vicky (St John’s) both applied to university, both went on to pursue apprenticeships. Both mentioned student debt in interviews and both believed an apprenticeship would lead to ‘better prospects’ (Vicky). Moderate attainer, Memphis (St John’s), described the opportunity of an apprenticeship where he would earn while training as ‘a no brainer’. Although small in number, these moderate attainers would appear indicative of Callender and Mason’s (2017) finding that fear of debt among lower income students may deter some from choosing to progress to HE (p. 20).

Year 12 school leavers

Some of the moderate attainers among my research participants chose to leave school at the end of year 12. Of these, St John's Memphis and Hallingford student, Kyle, left sixth form at the end of Year 12 to pursue apprenticeships. Kyle was the only non-conformer among my research participants who chose an alternative to HE owing to circumstances that were not of his choosing.

In what would be our final interview, Memphis was angry with St John's about an incident over which he felt he had been unfairly excluded. He insisted other students had been involved and that he was used as an 'example to others, kind of thing'. With his mother's help, Memphis researched online and found an apprenticeship scheme with an architect's office. Memphis told me he had not discussed his decision to take up this apprenticeship with anyone at St John's, explaining, 'They don't care anyway'.

It seemed likely that had Kyle been better supported at the end of year 12, he would have been a successful university applicant. A working class Polish boy, Kyle gained an A* in Polish, five As, three Bs and a C at GCSE. In an early interview, Kyle told me he wanted to go to a Russell Group university; although unsure what this meant, he knew he wanted to go 'somewhere good'. Ambitious and hard-working, I was surprised to find Kyle had not returned for year 13. When I tracked Kyle down, he agreed to meet me away from Hallingford. In a long interview, I learnt the Kyle had been excluded during the summer term of year 12 after fighting with some boys who had verbally abused his Hindu girlfriend.⁹⁵ He did not want to tell me what the boys said because 'it wasn't nice'. Kyle was held responsible for the fight because he was older and promptly excluded. A week after the fight, the gang organised a revenge attack on Kyle's younger brother which left him hospitalised for several weeks. Fearing for his own safety, Kyle felt unable to return to Hallingford for A levels. In our final interview, Kyle was still in shock over the way he had been treated. He felt badly let down and had seen no point in discussing his decision to leave with anyone at the school.

⁹⁵ The incident occurred after my second interview with Kyle, immediately after his AS levels, and he had every intention of progressing to year 13.

Seriously, Miss, I feel like I can't believe all that happened...I lost the end of [summer] term, all the UCAS stuff - gone, just like that. They don't care about people like me, my education. I wasn't allowed in school and then when I returned they like escorted me everywhere I went. It was crazy...and then the other guys, [got] nothing. No, I didn't talk to them. Why would I do that? I just didn't bother to turn up on the first day of term.

(Kyle, Hallingford)

The incident which made Kyle leave Hallingford made him re-think his future. Through an online search, Kyle found a company who placed people in apprenticeships. After passing a written test, he was placed in an apprenticeship with a digital media company. I was puzzled that Kyle had been allowed to leave so easily. I asked him if anyone from Hallingford's sixth form team had been in touch with him about his decision. Kyle repeated, 'They don't care, Miss', by which he meant no-one had. None of the sixth form team wanted to talk about what happened to Kyle. However, Mr Nelson's secretary and students who knew Kyle felt the fight was out of character and that Kyle had been unfairly treated.

'No-one's interested in kids like us'

Memphis and Kyle's feelings that their schools did 'not care' about them was a sentiment also expressed by St John's moderate attainers Erica and Michael. Both left for college at the end of year 12. Michael explained that his mother noticed he was better at 'doing things' than 'book learning' and encouraged him to look at courses in IT and business at the local FE college. Erica found her diploma in music production at a specialist music college through online research. Erica had friends at college and this meant she knew there were 'other options out there'. However, Erica sounded frustrated that St John's had not discussed alternatives to HE with students:

They could have given us more opportunities at the end of Year 11, you know? Given us more ideas about apprenticeships and college and where we could go...just looking at other things, really...I would have liked us to have been given other options (...//). The thing is, they're very results driven at [St John's].

(Erica, St John's)

As with Memphis, neither Erica or Michael felt able to discuss their decision with any of their teachers. Erica explained. 'Stuff that isn't academic it's like...well, there's no help...no-one's interested in kids like us'.

Hallingford moderate attainer Stacey, felt similarly to Erica and Kyle about how schools viewed students 'like' them. In an interview near the end of year 12, Stacey appeared intimidated by Hallingford's UCAS day. She could see the momentum gathering and felt frustrated by her lack of options. Stacey explained,

Kids like us, they don't really focus on us...we're the kids who just...people like me that still have no clue what we want to do...it's like they can't be bothered...

Stacey's uncertainty over university was made worse by her confused feelings over having no-one to talk to about alternatives to HE:

They say stuff like, 'We understand that university is not for everyone and there are apprenticeships available'...but that's it! They don't explain how you can find out about them or anything, because it's all focused on university, university, university, all the time.

(Stacey, Hallingford)

Stacey's comments were echoed by Adela. Although Adela would choose to progress to university, she had wondered about 'other options' when she 'underperformed' in her AS levels:

They don't talk about ways to choose between *go to university* or *don't go to university* 'cos you can do this and this...they haven't really given us, like, alternatives...I don't know about other things I could do. No clue. [...//] If you see the noticeboards, they're all about universities...Look! there and there...can you see over there? Like, it's *all* Russell Group this, Russell Group that. I see one scrappy bit of A4 paper on apprenticeships and that's it. It's all like that here.

(Adela, Hallingford)

St John's moderate attainer, Ella's AS levels were lower than her predicted grades. She still wanted to apply for university but had been impressed by a friend's decision to join the RAF. She had never thought of 'things like that'. She said she felt this was because St John's was so 'driven' to get students to progress to university:

They don't offer things about apprenticeships and things. [.../] If somebody said, like, 'Name a company which offers apprenticeships', I wouldn't actually know. I know they're difficult to find...but there isn't as much- I mean, there isn't like a book of apprenticeships you can go to. You should be able to say, 'But I want to do a *this* or *that* apprenticeship' and for them to say, 'These are the companies that do this and this is how much they pay, this is what they offer'. But there's nothing like that.

(Ella, St John's)

Ella pointed out that schools needed to be able to 'publicise their success rates'. She believed that one of the reasons schools did not talk about apprenticeships was because the entry requirements for apprenticeships did not incentivise students to attain A*/A grades. Showing a remarkably sophisticated understanding of the relationship between performance pressures and school practices, Ella explained,

I mean this school isn't going to get A grades from kids wanting to do apprenticeships, but they'll get A grades out of kids who want to go to uni. So actually, you push that (.../) You push people into university. I think it's a subconscious thing they do, but they do do it.

The 'push' to go to 'uni'

Ella described the 'push' towards university as 'subconscious'; other moderate attainers described 'the push' to go to university as something more forceful.

It's like they just wanna **push** us all into uni.

(Stacey, Hallingford)

I mean we have our form tutors to go to for things like that but mine, what she **pushes** us towards, is university.

(Zane, Hallingford)

Some saw ‘the push’ as being specifically about their school’s desire to get more Russell group and Oxbridge applications:

Maybe I'm looking at it from a bad point of view...like I'm just making it seem bad...but I do think some teachers, because they want the best...and because Oxbridge is the best...well, obviously, you **push** that.

(Vicky, St John’s)

Hallingford form tutor, Mr Wakefield, stressed the limitations of the particular focus of Hallingford’s HE discourse.

Here, it’s all about the Russell Group and the A*/A kids, and **pushing** that hugely academic element. A lot of kids would benefit from hearing more about how to access alternatives.

St John’s sixth form tutor, Miss Greenfield, expressed unease over her school’s ‘push’ towards university but stressed parental pressure as well:

I don't think it's just a failing on the school's part, but there is quite a **push** for all them to go to university here...and from the parents as well.

St John’s Careers Adviser, Mrs Hollis, said she saw ‘the push’ towards university in all schools, as well as from parents:

I've had students come to me from different backgrounds, and you can see they feel **pushed** [into university] and not just by the school, it’s parents **pushing** them, too.

Moderate attainer, Simon, was the only student who talked about feeling the double pressure of school and parental expectations that he should progress to university:

People here are very **pushy** about university and certainly a lot of people...and not just here but outside [school] too, my music mates, (*deep sigh*) and my parents...people expect you to go to university.

At St John’s, the ‘push’ appeared to be all-pervasive, integral to the HE discourse and to the ‘family project’ (Reay, 2015) of many of my participants. The ‘push’ towards university formed a key part of the ‘image of conduct, character and

manner' which both Hallingford and St John's wished to 'transmit' (Bernstein, 2005, p.34). Equally, the lack of 'care' felt by non-conformers was part of the 'expressive order' of Hallingford and St John's. Moderate attainers in both schools discussed the lack of information their schools provided on alternatives to university. Properly informed, it is possible that students such as Adela, Amy and Ella might have chosen an alternative to HE. In the next section, I examine the different coping strategies employed by moderate attainers who did not conform to the HE discourse of their schools.

Coping strategies

The frequency of the word 'push' by students and staff suggested an element of the HE discourse of schools which was felt to be forceful. It is possible that a 'push' was experienced by some at Hallingford and St John's as a positive 'nudge' in the direction of HE. However, this was not how students and teachers appeared to use 'push' in my interviews. In some cases, the 'push' integral to the HE discourse of St John's was felt to be intimidating. Simon described finding A levels 'stressful'. Initially, he appeared embarrassed about his uncertainty over university. He relaxed visibly once he realised I wanted to talk to him about his interest in apprenticeships. Simon spoke excitedly about the possibility of an apprenticeship with his uncle's accountancy firm. He believed his family's contacts, some of whom were 'in the City', were in a better position to advise him on his 'options' than anyone at St John's. However, it appeared that Simon also wanted to present himself as a potential HE applicant. He insisted university was 'still a possibility' and that he had 'not ruled university out'. Just as our first interview was ending, he suddenly announced:

The thing is...(hesitant, fearful) I'm not sure university is for me...[but] the school is so heavily university-focused you don't hear about other things you can do...

(Simon, St John's)

Over the course of my research, I came to believe that Simon's unease over being a non-conformer was due as much to parental pressure as it was to the 'push' from St John's. Unlike other non-conformers, Simon lacked the support of his parents, who

wanted him to go to university. He also appeared to lack the confidence of students such as Erica and Kyle, both of whom described choosing an alternative to HE without seeking parental or school support. In spite of his uncertainty that university 'was for [him]', Simon tried to conform to his parents' and school's expectations and researched degree courses. He described feeling overwhelmed by choice and being 'paralysed' into inaction. Simon's older sister, Simon confidante and adviser at home, suggested he 'used the gap year option'. Telling family and friends that he was taking a gap year '[took] the pressure off' and gave Simon time to decide what he wanted to do.

During weekly Life Skills periods when students worked on their UCAS applications, Simon said he 'pretend[ed] to look busy' on his laptop. He explained this was easy because his form tutor usually concentrated on Russell Group applicants. In an interview which took place after the deadline for submission, Simon told me that he had not submitted a UCAS application. I asked how this had been received by the school and he told me 'nobody's noticed', and laughed nervously. I asked how this was possible and Simon explained:

Obviously, UCAS has been the hot topic at school, but no-one's come up to me and said, 'Are you applying?', and 'Where?', or anything like that...[...//] people kept saying UCAS needs to be handed in on whatever date...but no-one came around and said 'Have you done it?'...They leave it to you. Which is...I dunno...it's a method of doing things, I suppose. And, it takes the pressure off me...I'm not applying and that's it...it's done...and teachers haven't asked (*pause*) but I do think it's not great that teachers don't ask, to be honest...(*pause*) because at the end of the day the whole point of school is to move on, to something else...so they probably should have some involvement in whatever it is you want to do...I do think they should have some involvement.

(Simon, St John's)

Simon's avoidance of detection suited him. However, as he points out, it also highlights how easily he was overlooked. A 'method', as Simon implies, which relies on the proactivity of students to get help with their UCAS applications,

coupled with a form tutor motivated to assist only higher attaining students with their UCAS applications, suggests a systemic weakness. Nonetheless, with the ‘pressure off’ both at school and at home, Simon was happier. Four months after leaving school, a family friend told Simon’s father of an apprenticeship in sales with Nissan cars. Simon applied and was accepted. In my final interview with Simon, held after he had left school, he appeared resigned but his apprenticeship with Nissan was not one in which he took much pride. He sounded lonely when he talked about his school friends at university and the disappointment he believed himself to be to his parents. Although reluctant to talk about his home life, Simon’s medical student sister and his father’s occupation as a musician pointed to a lower middle or middle-class habitus. Simon’s discomfort over working for Nissan appeared to result from his position as a trainee car salesman being a poor ‘fit’ with his familial habitus and their aspirations.

‘Passing’ as an HE applicant

Another St John’s non-conformer, Vicky, was never certain about university but she completed a UCAS application. While still at school, she appeared to believe that university would lead to a ‘better job’ but was apprehensive about living away from home. Within days of submitting her UCAS application to study Accounting and Management at Winchester, Vicky applied and was accepted for an apprenticeship scheme with a local accountancy firm. In an interview held after she left school, Vicky said she was excited about her position and its ‘prospects’. She also spoke revealingly about her time at St John’s, and some of the petty humiliations she had experienced as a moderate attainer applying to ‘new’ universities. She remained hurt by the ‘snobby’ (Vicky) female Maths teacher who, Vicky said, told the class, ‘There’s no point going to university unless it’s Russell Group’. I asked Vicky if it was possible that this remark had influenced her sudden decision not to go to university. Vicky did not think it had. She told me she believed training in accountancy was going to be more useful ‘in the long run’ than an accountancy degree. While she did not appear to feel the stigma of not progressing to university as keenly as Simon, Vicky’s coping strategy, the completion of a UCAS application, could be described as ‘passing’ as an HE applicant. As Goffman (1959) describes, the ‘rewards’ of being considered ‘normal’ mean that anyone in a position to ‘pass’

will do so if they can (p.95). Arguably, to be ‘normal’ in the context of sixth forms such as St John’s and Hallingford was to conform and aspire to university. It seemed possible that Vicky disguised her non-conformity and passed as an HE applicant by going through the process of a UCAS application. Simon’s ‘gap year option’ and pretending to ‘look busy’ on his laptop during Life Skill periods, also served as forms of passing, where one side ‘does not tell’ and the other ‘fails to ask’ (Leary, 1999, p.85). By implication, Simon’s busyness and his use of the term ‘gap year’ suggested to school, parents and ‘music mates’ that he was an HE applicant. Nonetheless, a supportive family appeared to make Vicky more comfortable with her non-conformity than Simon with his. No-one in Vicky’s family had been to university, and her mother and grandfather were encouraging of her apprenticeship applications. Unlike Simon, who felt the need to pass both within and outside his school, Vicky only had to pass in St John’s.

Finding alternatives – the influence of social capital

At Hallingford, Dale, Hari and Zane, all expressed uncertainty about university during our interviews in year 12, and all wanted to find an apprenticeship. Zane did not trust that the school could help him with his research for apprenticeships in the music industry. He found researching online ‘useless’; however, he had a rich social network of contacts in the local music scene to whom he turned for advice. One of his contacts had ‘hot’ knowledge about an apprenticeship scheme run by a record label. Although Zane would eventually progress to university, he had been excited by the prospect of an apprenticeship, explaining:

Apprenticeships are more appealing...getting training, getting paid...but no-one ever speaks to you about apprenticeships.

(Zane, Hallingford)

Hallingford moderate attainers Hari and Dale also hoped to find an apprenticeship. Although both talked about university as ‘an option’, neither appeared to invest time in researching HE courses. I wondered if these boys, like St John’s Vicky and Simon, wished to pass as HE applicants. Passing in Hallingford also meant avoiding the kind of conflict with Hallingford’s Head of Sixth Form that fellow non-conformer Stacey experienced (see later). Hari spent most of our interviews talking

about his research into apprenticeships in engineering and law.⁹⁶ He was especially interested in apprenticeship schemes offered by his local council, some of which could be accessed with 180 UCAS points, which he felt he could attain.⁹⁷ Although he enjoyed History, Hari appeared unenthusiastic about studying. It was therefore a surprise when Hari announced, in his final interview, that he had applied for Law. A working-class Hindu son of a single father, Hari appeared under pressure to go to university from an aunt involved in his care, who was a solicitor. Nonetheless, Hari did not attain the necessary grades for his law course. In texts informing me of his A level results, Hari explained he had been accepted on an engineering apprenticeship which his uncle had found with a firm of civil engineers through ‘a government website’ (Hari). Shy and monosyllabic in interview, Hari’s texts explaining that he would be working in the company’s headquarters and studying at college were unexpectedly detailed, and full of smiling emojis. One of his initial texts stated, ‘Not interested in uni, now!’ I had the impression that Hari was delighted with how things had turned out.

In our first interview, Hallingford moderate attainer Stacey talked at length about her interest in studying make-up. An arrangement between Hallingford and a local FE college meant girls could study for a BTEC in Hair and Beauty with other qualifications. However, Stacey seemed reluctant to be categorised as the type of girl who studied Hair and Beauty:

I think that maybe people think- (*embarrassed, squirming*)...that it's kind of...there's a stereotype of people who do Hair and Beauty...you know? It's always been a thing here [Hallingford] that because you're not like, *academic*, you're not very good with school, so make-up is kind of something you do... *Oh, she's the kid that doesn't really want to do anything intellectual...*stuff like that.

(Stacey, Hallingford)

⁹⁶ I believe Hari meant a paralegal apprenticeship.

⁹⁷ UCAS points – each A level grade is worth a certain amount of UCAS points. At the time of my research, an A grade was worth 120 points, a B was worth 100 points, a C was worth 80 points and a D 60 points.

Predicted Bs in her Applied Business and Photography AS levels, Stacey was uncertain about progressing to university. She said Hallingford was not interested in the university choices of 'us B kids'. Stacey believed that Hallingford was more interested in getting students into Russell Group universities and explained that this focus started before GCSE:

From year 9, they had the 'Russell Group' which was like the Russell Group university kids...they were all like the A* kids; they wore badges ...they had these little Russell Group Badges...

(Stacey, Hallingford) ⁹⁸

I asked Stacey how it made her feel to see some of her peers wearing Russell Group badges. She laughed out loud and responded in a way that suggested she thought they were preposterous:

Well, I thought...(laughing) 'That's nice!'

I checked with Stacey that she was being ironic:

Yeah, I am! (laughs) I was like, 'O.K...great! (ironically)...so, where am I going'?

(Stacey, Hallingford)

By the time we met in year 13, Stacey, was resolute about not going to university. She had started to research beauty colleges and apprenticeships online, with the support of her hairdresser mother. Stacey told me she could not 'see the point' of going to university for a degree she did not need. However, Stacey's decision brought her into conflict with Head of Sixth Form Mr Nelson who, she said, was 'constantly on at' her about applying to university. Among Mr Nelson's many attempts to persuade Stacey to study make-up at degree level was his claim to have a friend who had studied prosthetic make-up at university. Stacey's anger stemmed from the fact she did not believe middle-aged Mr Nelson had a friend who had studied make-up, exclaiming, 'As if, Miss!' She believed Mr Nelson 'just made it up' to persuade her to go to university. She was also cross that Mr Nelson's

⁹⁸ See Appendix O for a picture of Hallingford's Russell Group badge. Withdrawn during the course of my research, students told me this was because some high attainers refused to wear them.

ignorance about different kinds of make-up meant he could not see why a degree in prosthetic make-up held no interest for someone interested in beauty. The 'harassment' (Stacey) from Mr Nelson became too much for Stacey. She sounded appalled when she confessed to 'losing it' one day and shouting at Mr Nelson, 'Leave me alone!' After this incident, Stacey's tactic was to avoid Mr Nelson until the UCAS deadline had passed.

Stacey had friends and family members who worked in hair and beauty. Her half-sister, to whom Stacey was close and with whom she spoke 'a lot' about training in make-up, was a successful make-up artist. Stacey said her mother, who ran a local hairdressing salon, 'had never been out of work'. Stacey believed working in beauty was deemed 'too working class' for Mr Nelson. She pointed out,

People quite happily go and have their hair cut by someone who is obviously not an 'intellectual' ... it's a trade, and people always need people with a trade. People aren't going to stop growing hair and not need a haircut. Even Mr Nelson needs a haircut.

(Stacey, Hallingford)

Stacey's observations pointed to an intuitive understanding of a 'clash' between her white, working class habitus and Mr Nelson's middle-class teacher habitus. Stacey was proud of her half-sister and mother's success in the beauty industry, and Mr Nelson lacked the type of cultural capital which had currency for Stacey. Buoyed by a familial habitus which valued a particular type of cultural capital possessed by the women in her family and social network, Stacey's sense of self and aspirations did not need Mr Nelson's approval or help. In this way, she resembled Zane. Her strong sense of identity as a local working-class girl 'good at make-up' felt empowering for Stacey, in spite of the conflict her non-conformity brought her with Mr Nelson and Hallingford's HE discourse (see Archer et al, 2007). After encouragement from her mother, Stacey decided to take a gap year working alongside the beautician who worked in her mother's hair salon. Stacey was the only moderate attainer among Hallingford and St John's non-conformers who was unashamed about her non-conformity. Because of her confident rejection of 'uni', I classified her as a 'rebel non-conformer'.

Reay et al (2005) describe working-class students' HE choosing as being 'full of emotion' (p.100). In a similar way, the accounts of Hallingford and St John's non-conformers were evidence of post-school choosing being an emotionally charged experience. Even where students were proud of their alternatives to HE, their choices came after two years in a school sixth form knowing their aspirations did not 'fit' the HE discourse of their school. Feelings of frustration, uncertainty, distress and shame characterised non-conformers' accounts of how they managed their post-school aspirations in school sixth forms which 'pushed' university. Most disguised their uncertainty about university and passed as HE applicants by completing a UCAS application. Simon avoided surveillance by simply doing nothing and used the 'gap year option' in order to pass as an HE applicant. Stacey openly rejected the HE discourse of her school.

Only Hallingford year 12 leaver, Kyle, found himself in the position of having to choose an alternative to HE. All other Hallingford and St John's non-conformers expressed the opinion that they could not see 'the point' of university and/or that an apprenticeship would give them better prospects for future employment. Where their individual habitus (as in the case of Zane, and year 12 school leavers, Erica and Kyle), or familial habitus (as with Dale, Vicky and Stacey, and school leavers, Memphis and Michael), were aligned with choosing an alternative to HE, non-conformers felt able to reject their school's 'push' towards university. Only Simon appeared conflicted about not progressing to university. His family's aspirational, lower middle class familial habitus pointed to him being an ideal 'fit' with the institutional habitus of St John. In rejecting university, Simon arguably also rejected the collective 'family spirit' (Bourdieu, 1998) or 'family project' (Reay, 2015) for social mobility, which his sister's status as a medical student satisfied. Without the type of family habitus to buoy his non-conformity to St John's institutional habitus, Simon came across as the most isolated and unhappy of the non-conformers in this study.

Alternatives to HE – formal provision

I was told more than once by staff members at Hallingford and St John's that 'university's not for everyone', and both schools hosted apprenticeship events during the course of my research. However, a common theme to the experiences described

by non-conforming moderate attainers was that their school did not *care* about them and their aspirations. St John's appeared to provide more information than Hallingford on alternatives to HE. Time was allocated to alternatives to HE during St John's year 12 UCAS day and information on apprenticeships was posted on the sixth form website. However, the website was not regularly updated and did not appear to offer much more than students would find using a Google search. Students at Hallingford and St John's who found apprenticeships all did so with the help of their families.

Hallingford

The Higher Apprenticeship Fair

At Hallingford, a Higher Apprenticeship Fair (the HA Fair) took place during lessons at the beginning of my student cohort's Year 12. The Fair was organised by Melanie, a member of the sixth form support team. However, only form groups comprised of BTEC students were invited to attend. When I asked about students in other form groups who might like to attend, Melanie appeared surprised by the question and told me, 'It's not really meant for kids who are going to uni'. Melanie's comment pointed to the assumption that all students who were studying A levels aspired to university and that all BTEC students sought apprenticeships. The latter was in spite of the evidence of numerous noticeboards in Hallingford's sixth form celebrating former BTEC students who had progressed to university.⁹⁹ Stacey heard about the HA Fair from a friend but was told she could not attend because it would mean missing lessons. She was only allowed to attend after her mother intervened and sought special permission from Helen, the member of the sixth form support team responsible for BTEC students. However, the Fair was a disappointment. Stacey explained, 'It was aimed at the boys – all plumbing and builders and stuff like that'. Melanie told me she found organising the HA Fair 'time-consuming'. In future, she thought it would be 'easier' to take students to an externally organised apprenticeship event.

⁹⁹ There were no noticeboards celebrating students' successful placements in apprenticeships.

Support for apprenticeship-seekers

Confused by Melanie and Helen's roles in relation to the HA Fair, I asked Mr Nelson who was responsible for advising students about apprenticeships. He declared, '[Helen's] your woman! She knows everything there is to know!' Only two of the moderate attainers I interviewed at Hallingford, Zane and Dale, who were both studying BTECs, were aware that advising students on Higher Apprenticeships was one of Helen's responsibilities. I attempted to interview Helen twice about this area of her work. On both occasions our interviews were interrupted by Helen's mobile phone, at which point she concluded the interview.

I believed that Helen did not want to talk about her role as apprenticeships adviser and was therefore surprised when one day she presented me with Sylvester, explaining that she had placed him on an apprenticeship scheme with Virgin. Although embarrassed by the sudden attention, Sylvester agreed to be interviewed. Sylvester's vagueness about the details of his apprenticeship prompted me ask him if he was really going to start an apprenticeship at Virgin. Sylvester answered, 'I'm not sure, Miss'. When I asked if he had ever applied to Virgin, Sylvester replied, 'Yeah, but I don't think I heard back' and appeared to be suppressing a laugh. I got the distinct impression that Sylvester had never applied to Virgin. I promised not to say anything, to which he responded, 'Probably best not!'

It seemed possible that Sylvester pretended to apply for his apprenticeship to avoid scrutiny. In this way, he behaved similarly to moderate attainers who passed as HE applicants. Sylvester told me he wanted to be a car mechanic. He described how bored he had been during his year 10 work experience, working in a primary school. I expressed surprise at his placement and Sylvester explained that he and his friends had a reputation for being 'jokers' in class. He said, 'They put kids like us any old where'. I asked Sylvester about the chances of getting work as a car mechanic and he told me he was considering applying for an apprenticeship with 'Kwik Fit', which a friend had told him about. Although he was not one of my research participants, Sylvester's use of phrases such as 'kids like us' being 'put any old where' echoed those of several Hallingford and St John's moderate attainers who felt their schools did not 'care' or could not 'be bothered' about them and their post-school aspirations.

On another occasion, I happened to be outside Helen's office when one of my research participants, Dale, went to see Helen for advice on apprenticeships. To my surprise, I overheard Helen referring Dale to the school's careers office. A conversation I had had with the school's Careers Adviser, Mr Grayson, revealed that he did not advise sixth formers, although he would 'try to help' if any sixth former came to see him. Mr Grayson volunteered that he did not think any sixth former would make an appointment with him because they 'were advised' (on post-school choosing) by Mr Nelson and the sixth form support team. In the end, none of the non-conformers who took part in my research who sought apprenticeships were helped by their school.

Beyond the sovereignty of Hallingford's institutional habitus

Dale never referred to approaching anyone at Hallingford for advice on apprenticeships. In our first interview, he referred to university as 'a possibility'. However, he showed little interest in researching degree courses. I gained the impression that Dale wished to present university as a 'possibility' because it was expected of him. By the time of our second interview, the deadline for UCAS applications had passed and Dale had not applied to HE. I asked him what he hoped to do after school, and Dale explained that his father was helping him to find an apprenticeship. A refuse collector for the local council, Dale's father had friends and family members who worked at Heathrow and for London Underground who knew of apprenticeship schemes within their organisations. In addition, Dale had an uncle who was helping him with his applications. Dale said he was also researching apprenticeship schemes online but appeared less confident of the value of the internet as a route to possible employment. Like Zane, Dale appeared not to resent the lack of help from his school. His frequent references to his father and his uncle gave me the impression that he trusted his family's social network for sources of 'hot' knowledge more than the school. However, one year after leaving Hallingford, Dale was still applying for apprenticeships.

Zane, the only son of a single mother, appeared to have 'grown' his own specialised social capital. In lieu of family social networks on which Dale and Stacey could rely, Zane turned to his network of musician friends for advice on his post school options. He explained:

I feel more comfortable talking to friends because I know they were in a similar situation to me. (...//) Being friends with people in the [music] scene is sort of an advantage because you can get advice from people who've been in your shoes.

(Zane, Hallingford)

After being shown around the campuses of two universities and allowed to have 'have a go' on some of the equipment in the music rooms, Zane changed his mind about an apprenticeship with a record company and was inspired to apply to university. However, as with Dale and Stacey, Zane's habitus and HE choice did not fit easily with Hallingford's institutional habitus and Mr Nelson's aspirations for his sixth formers. As discussed in Chapter 6, Zane's HE application to study Sonic Arts was not one which Mr Nelson prioritised.

For Dale and Stacey, a seamless 'fit' between their families' habituses and the habitus of their white, working class community gave rise to opportunities which appeared to feel more 'natural' - a better 'fit' - than conforming to the HE discourse of their school sixth form. Dale and Stacey, but also Zane and Hari, were all examples of moderate attainers who were able to move beyond the 'sovereignty' of Hallingford's institutional habitus, and the values of Mr Nelson's teacher habitus. Stacey's decision to work in her mother's hair salon, Dale's introduction to local apprenticeship schemes through family networks, and Zane's sourcing of 'hot' knowledge about apprenticeships in the music industry and then music degrees, all illustrate the value of family and social networks to Hallingford's non-conformers. Their social capital typified, as Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) describe,

...the sum of (...) resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition.

(Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p.119)

I would find that the majority of Hallingford's BAME moderate attainers were in possession of a different type of social capital to that which helped Dale, Stacey and Zane to realise their post-school aspirations. Although BAME students might access

opportunities for work experience and Saturday jobs in shops and small businesses run by extended family and social networks, most came from aspirational families who reinforced the HE discourse of the school. As a Hindu moderate attainer who did not progress to university, Hari was an unusual BAME student in the context of my sample. High attaining BAME students who aspired to HE were well supported by Hallingford teachers. However, as I showed in Chapters 5 and 6, moderately attaining BAME students who aspired to university, just as their white counterparts, were forced to access support informally.

St John's

Careers advice

St John's, unlike Hallingford, has a whole-school careers service. It is provided by a private company, the cost of which is shared by a small group of local schools.¹⁰⁰ The Careers Adviser, Mrs Hollis, visits the school twice a week and sixth formers may book an appointment to see her. This is usually done through Miss Harrison, assistant to Mrs Jay. However, in interview, it became clear that few sixth formers were aware of the careers service. During the course of my research, only two out of over 20 students interviewed had met with Mrs Hollis. Amy told me she went to see Mrs Hollis after attaining poorly in her mock AS levels. She described Mrs Hollis as 'lovely' and 'very helpful'. On questioning, it turned out that Mrs Hollis had been kind to Amy when Amy became upset during their meeting. Amy's assessment of her careers advice appeared to be largely based on the time and sympathy Mrs Hollis gave her. Advice Amy was given amounted to being shown a website where Amy could enter her predicted grades and find suitable degree courses. Simon's meeting with Mrs Hollis left him disillusioned. He said that Mrs Hollis had told him nothing that he 'did not know already' from his own online research of possible degree courses (see Reay et al, 2005, p.39). Mrs Hollis told me that most students who came to see her wanted to research alternatives to university. By the second term of the final year of my research, Mrs Hollis had seen 66 students out of a total of 336 year

¹⁰⁰ Since my research, a senior teacher has taken over responsibility for careers and the external provider changed.

12 and year 13 students. Out of 66 students, 52 students sought advice about alternatives to university.

St John's weekly Life Skills form periods were also meant to be an opportunity where form tutors might offer careers advice to form groups and/or personalised support for students who sought alternatives to HE. As discussed in Chapter 5, students completed an 'Attainment and Aspirations' booklet during year 13 Life Skills form periods. The final page of this booklet comprised a 'Careers Research' table for students who sought alternatives to HE to record their research.¹⁰¹ Neither of the two year 13 non-conformers, Amy and Simon, recognised the Careers Research page. Simon explained that he did not take the 'Attainment and Aspirations' booklet 'that seriously'. Vicky explained that since she had completed a UCAS application she had not 'really looked at' the Careers Research page. Neither Amy or Simon could recall any careers advice given during Life Skills periods. Nonetheless, I met two form tutors who felt strongly about providing advice and guidance on alternatives to HE and discuss their views further on.

External providers

Mrs Jay's unease over the school's 'push' towards university, and Oxbridge in particular, could be detected through her attempts to introduce more support for students who sought alternatives to HE. Mrs Jay told me:

We're really good at preparing them for university. What we're not so good at are the ones who maybe don't want to go to university...the kids' perception is that we don't help them as much, so I'm really working hard to bring in our careers adviser more, and build up a network of speakers, specifically for kids who don't want to go to university.

During the first year of my research, St John's hosted an apprenticeship assembly which took place during a year 12 Life Skills period. High attainers did not attend. During the assembly, a former pupil on a Higher Apprenticeship (HA), and representatives from four companies (one of which was a specialised recruitment agency) all offering HAs, talked about the benefits of apprenticeships. The

¹⁰¹ See Appendix P for the Careers Research page.

apprenticeship schemes they offered typically demanded ABB or BBB at A level. Representatives spoke of apprenticeships as an alternative to university but appeared to be targeting the same students which schools such as St John's encouraged to aspire to university. Online research also showed that one of the companies prioritised 'top grades' gained in the same year and on 'first attempt'. When moderate attainer, Vicky, made an application to one of the companies, she failed their online numeracy test. This was in spite of attaining a B in her Maths AS level.

The apprenticeship assembly was not repeated the following year. From conversations with Mrs Jay, I understood she trod a difficult path as a Head of Sixth Form keen to provide information on alternatives to HE in a school where the senior management wanted resources to be focused on increasing its Oxbridge outcomes. Nonetheless, Mrs Jay invited representatives from the local FE college to present on apprenticeships during the second of the two UCAS days I observed at St John's. The session attracted around 50 students. This was far more than the nine students who attended a workshop given by a private provider the previous year, and indicated a rise in interest in alternatives to HE. The FE manager responsible for apprenticeship schemes at her college, Angela, spoke to me about the difficulty her college had accessing schools. In a conversation held in St John's car park, Angela explained it was her first visit to St John's. She said that St John's was one of the 'very few' schools in the area willing to let her talk to students about opportunities at college. Angela believed schools were 'scared of losing students' and that this lay behind a reluctance to invite representatives from colleges to speak:

It's bums on seats. Every kid that goes to college represents a loss of revenue for these schools, and schools get a lot more kudos with parents for sending kids to university.

(Angela, FE manager)

Angela added, 'There's a stigma attached to college, and especially with some of the parents from around here'. As she spoke, she gestured towards the rows of detached suburban houses beyond St John's school gates. Angela felt strongly that college was a better post-16 option for many students but that they were 'never given the option'.

The ‘stigma’ of college

Angela’s observations about the ‘stigma’ attached to college was one I recognised at Hallingford and St John’s. Except for Erica and Michael, no-one at St John’s expressed interest in going to college. Even fellow school leaver, Memphis, believed the ‘the kind of kids’ who attended college were ‘trouble’ and said this put him off going. At Hallingford, there appeared to be a ‘discourse of derision’ in relation to the local FE college. Some Hallingford students spoke of friends who ‘ended up at’ or ‘had to go to’ college because they failed to get sufficient GCSEs to access Hallingford’s Sixth Form. Stacey’s reluctance to study make-up was because students who attended college courses were looked down on by other students. The stigma of being a college student appeared to be reinforced by the Head of Sixth Form, Mr Nelson’s disparaging remarks about college. For example, I overheard a student who risked a cheeky retort being told by Mr Nelson, ‘You can go to [local college], with an attitude like that!’. On another occasion, a student who wished to drop an AS level was told, ‘Go to [local college] if you can’t be bothered to work’. College was presented as the *deficit* choice, not a respectable alternative at Hallingford.¹⁰²

‘Entrepreneurial’ form tutors

In this section I present examples of sixth form tutors whose teacher habituses appeared particularly well suited to supporting moderate attainers who sought alternatives to HE. Oliver and Kettley’s (2010) study of the influence of teacher habitus on students’ access to ‘elite’ universities is framed by the fair access discourse. As discussed in Chapters 5 and 6, the influence of teacher habitus was seen to facilitate moderately attaining students’ applications to non-selective universities. Equally, the influence of teacher habitus on the post-school choosing of students who did *not* aspire to HE may be examined. Four form tutors emerged in this study who were particularly resourceful in accessing information and opportunities for non-conformers. In schools where the dominance of the HE

¹⁰² See Table 17 and Table 18 for a reminder of all Hallingford and St John’s non-conformers and their post-school destinations.

discourses meant few resources for students who sought alternatives to HE, these 'entrepreneurial' form tutors were exceptional.

St John's

At St John's, Miss Greenfield and Mrs Barker described the problems of helping students who felt under pressure to apply to HE. Mrs Barker said she believed there was a 'stigma attached to not going to university' at St John's, reinforced by parental pressure:

You will always get students who want to go to university...but sometimes I think...(searching for words) that it's not just school pressure, it's parental pressure too, which is huge. Around [St John's], I find it's very big...it's everywhere...I just *feel* it. I *sense* it. When I look at some of the kids, I can *see* it. They're so unhappy...I want to ask them, 'Why can't you just tell your parents: *That's not what I want...that's not what I want to do?*'

(Mrs Barker, St John's)

Miss Greenfield described trying to give her 'best advice' to some students:

With my [year 13] form last year there were some students who, even with my...you know...my best advice, they decided they were still going to go to university and I think they ended up on some pretty grim courses, to be honest. (...//) I don't think it's a failing on the school's part, but there is quite a *push* for all them to go to university, and from the parents as well.

(Miss Greenfield, St John's)

Miss Greenfield thought it possible that about a quarter of the 24 students to whom she had been form tutor in the previous year might have been better off choosing a vocational route:

One person I can think of was offered an apprenticeship doing beauty in a local salon where she'd done work experience, and done really well, but decided that she was going to go to Derby to do Health and Beauty, with Management, I think. Anyway, she did her personal statement and...well (*deep intake of breath*) I mean, the spelling mistakes! You know? And I was

like... 'You've actually sent this?' and she was 'Yes ... but I didn't show anybody.' And I said, 'I can see that!'...and then she was preparing for her interview and I kept saying to her, 'Are going to do something with that chipped nail varnish?' and 'Have you have been reading industry papers to try and find out what the new thing is?'. And she goes, 'No, Miss,' (*in 'gormless' voice*). And you just think this is so clearly not the way for you... (*trails off, sounds frustrated and sad*)

(Miss Greenfield, St John's)

Miss Greenfield and Mrs Barker's descriptions of their work as form tutors revealed a proactive interest in helping students who sought alternatives to HE. Miss Greenfield described using her social network to help students interested in apprenticeships. This included speaking to a contact in the HR department of a marketing company from whom she sought advice on students' CVs and apprenticeship applications. Miss Greenfield said what she had learnt was 'enormously helpful'. She believed the advice was instrumental in getting two of her students onto 'good' banking apprenticeships. Mrs Barker explained that she was new to the role of sixth form tutor and took the work of advising on HE and non-HE choosing seriously. She described speaking to her husband for advice on how to help students uncertain about university:

I often say, 'Oh, this student wants to do this. What do you think?' He's a bit more global than I am, if you like (*laughs*) (...//) He's a crew leader at British Airways but he has to manage people and he really gets so much information...he knows so much about things, but he's not subject-specific. So, once, he got a clipping out of the paper about a government incentive to do apprenticeships and showed me their website. Now, I didn't know this. I didn't know *any* of that information. Then he got me another clipping out of *The Times* where they'd interviewed a person who'd gone on to do an apprenticeship, and how they felt about it, and what unique support they had. He's global for me. I always go to him.

(Mrs Barker, St John's)

Mrs Barker's use of 'global' to describe her husband's knowledge highlighted her understanding of the need for form tutors to look beyond their area of expertise to best support some students. Mrs Barker's approach to her role as sixth form tutor, as with Miss Greenfield's, suggested a type of teacher habitus which was especially useful for supporting non-conformers' post-school choosing. Through family and social networks, both form tutors sourced information unavailable in school sixth forms with a dominant HE discourse. Possessing practical skills, and relevant social capital, both teachers were also strongly motivated to support non-conformers. Mrs Barker, especially, spoke feelingly about supporting non-conformers. She appeared to sense an affinity between her own working-class habitus and the working-class moderate attainers in her form who struggled to conform to St John's HE discourse.

Hallingford

Among Hallingford's sixth form tutors, Mr Douglas and Mr Riley were singled out by moderate attainers as being equally supportive whether students aspired to HE or sought alternatives. Both teachers had previous careers as research scientists at leading Russell Group universities and had knowledge of industries and professions that went beyond their subject specialisms (see Fuller et al, 2014). Both were described by students as giving time freely. Moderate attainers taught by Mr Douglas or who were in his form group, described asking for help for anything from work experience and Chemistry homework to UCAS applications. Importantly for non-conformers, Mr Douglas was especially supportive of students who sought alternatives to university. His specialised cultural capital and social networking skills meant he had built excellent working relationships with local companies. From accounts students gave, it seemed Mr Douglas brought previously unheard-of opportunities for work experience for moderate attainers. Unlike their high attaining peers, moderate attainers never benefited from work experience sourced by Mr Nelson and other senior members of staff. In a similar way to Miss Greenfield and Mrs Barker at St John's, Mr Douglas was an 'entrepreneurial' form tutor. Proactive and enterprising, Mr Douglas appeared to reject the sovereignty of Hallingford's institutional habitus which saw high attainers and their HE aspirations prioritised. Mr Douglas explained, 'Every kid needs something to aspire to' and felt strongly that this did not have to be a Russell Group destination. He described networking with

local firms with the aim of sourcing work experience opportunities and introducing students to alternatives to HE:

I went to visit [local company] with some students about five years ago, and we've never looked back [...//] I get on so well with the top executives now that all I have to do is send an e-mail saying *I have three or four lads or girls, is there any chance of them doing some work experience* and they always say 'Yes'. And I have three or four kids doing work experience at [local company] next month. Now, they're a new company I've brought in. They've given talks here, so I'm building [relations] there too. And then there's [local technology company]...I got on really well with the head of HR. They never turn me down when I ask for work experience for the kids.

(Mr Douglas, Hallingford)

Mr Douglas insisted students took work experience opportunities seriously; he made students submit a CV and write a letter of application, even when the placement was already secured. Mr Douglas explained that this was all part of his desire to motivate students made to feel 'dumb' (Mr Douglas) in a school which put a premium on high attainment.

Moderate attainer, Naz, described approaching Mr Douglas for help with obtaining work experience. Naz, who was from a working-class migrant family, told me he would have had 'no chance' if he applied independently to a company for work experience. In language that pointed to Naz's understanding of the value of being part of Mr Douglas' social network, he explained, 'I'm very close with him and he's got very close contacts with the company where I wanted to work'. Naz elaborated:

So obviously I thought the best thing to do, instead of going to the actual company and applying for work experience, was to go through [Mr Douglas] and say, 'Listen, can you put in a good word for me?' And he did. Thank God! He replied to me and said, 'Yes, you've got a place.' I mean it was amazing! [Mr Douglas] so helped me.

(Naz, Hallingford)

Without Mr Douglas's contacts, it is highly unlikely Naz would have been able to get placed in the type work experience usually reserved for Hallingford's Oxbridge applicants. I told Mr Douglas that one of the reasons for wanting to interview him was because he and Mr Riley had been cited by moderate attainers as form tutors willing to support them, whether they aspired to HE or an apprenticeship scheme. I explained that I knew from accounts given by a range of students that students in Hallingford's 'top' form groups received far more support with their UCAS applications than their moderately attaining peers. I also gave examples of prestigious work experience which high attainers described being arranged by some of Hallingford's senior teachers. Mr Douglas seemed genuinely taken aback, and responded,

I am not sure if I have the right to say this but: (*triumphantly*) there you go! There you have it! My issue is this: I would hate a young person to feel they are worth *less* than another young person. That's my issue. I don't know how the school can explain that.

(Mr Douglas, Hallingford)

Mr Douglas' surprise over the amount of investment in high attainers pointed to the invisibility of 'informal cultures of advice' from which high attainers benefited, and which belied 'official' practices (p.738) of the HE process at Hallingford. In addition, the time and energy Mr Douglas invested in moderate attainers, and the gratitude among those in my student sample who benefited from his practical support, pointed to a gap in the provision for their post-school choosing.

Concluding thoughts

This study is not alone in finding that different post-16 routes have different levels of prestige and status, and that some schools place a much greater emphasis on particular routes than others (Fuller et al, 2014, p.270). In Hallingford and St John's, non-conformers felt strongly that their schools did not 'care' about them and their post-school choices. Some understood their aspirations were not in synergy with their schools' aspirational habitus and the 'push' towards university. They found ways to circumnavigate the HE discourse of their schools, and used a range of 'coping strategies' to disguise their non-conformity. For most, coping included a

way of passing as an HE applicant. Only one non-conformer, Stacey, was unashamed about her non-conformity. Her pride in her working-class background and the support it gave for her post-school aspirations, appeared to make it possible for Stacey to reject Hallingford's HE discourse. Stacey made no attempt to pass as an HE applicant or to disguise her non-conformity. However, this brought her into conflict with Hallingford's Head of Sixth Form, Mr Nelson.

Without support for their post-school choosing, non-conformers were forced to look outside the context of their sixth form for advice and guidance. Just one non-conformer, Hallingford's Kyle, relied solely on the internet to find his apprenticeship. The other nine conformers in this study received support from family and/or social networks to access apprenticeship opportunities or college places. In the absence of school support, working-class students' family and social networks provided vital 'hot' knowledge and guidance, as well as necessary emotional support and affirmation for their post-school choices. Without family approval for his aspirations, it was especially difficult for St John's Simon to take pride in his non-conformity.

It is possible that schools such as Hallingford and St John's struggle to provide advice on alternatives to HE because they lack the resources and staff with appropriate knowledge and skills. As Chadderton (2015) points out, when responsibility for careers was shifted to schools in 2011, schools were given only 'the vaguest of guidelines' for what was expected of them and no extra funding to provide a careers service (p.84). In addition, as Fuller et al (2014) explain, many teachers lack the confidence to give help and guidance on careers 'outside of their sphere of familiarity' (p. 281). This may explain why Mr Douglas and Mr Riley, whose teacher habituses included a previous career, were reported to be particularly responsive to the needs of non-conformers. Nonetheless, all 'entrepreneurial' form tutors who emerged in this study, and Head of St John's Sixth Form Mrs Jay, were found to use their agency to circumnavigate the HE discourses of their schools. All found ways to provide support for non-conformers and in this way worked towards a more socially just distribution of resources. Arguably, Mr Douglas exemplified the 'entrepreneurial' form tutor. Highly motivated, he was especially proactive in the deployment of his cultural and social capital on behalf of non-conformers. Students

helped by Mr Douglas' support benefited from opportunities and levels of support usually reserved for high attainers who aspired to 'elite' universities.

Teachers who use their agency to act as facilitators for the HE and non-HE aspirations of moderate attainers would seem a useful development of Oliver and Kettley's work on teacher habitus. If, as Callendar and Mason's (2017) study indicates, fear of student debt is deterring increasing numbers of poorer students from participating in HE, it seems likely that schools who rely on moderate attainers to fund their sixth forms will have to provide better support for students seeking alternatives.

CHAPTER 8

Conclusion

I do think it's not great that teachers don't ask, to be honest...(pause) because at the end of the day the whole point of school is to move on, to something else...

Simon (St John's)

Kids like us, they don't really focus on us...

Stacey (Hallingford)

An overview of the study

When I started to research moderately attaining sixth formers I expected to find inequalities in the types and levels of support schools offered different groups with their post-school choosing. In this I was right. In state schools Hallingford and St John's, I found a disproportionate investment in high attainers applying to Russell Group universities, and especially Oxbridge, and levels of support for attainment different groups were differentiated in a myriad of formal and informal ways. As with Reay's (1998) working class HE applicants, moderate attainers were generally overlooked in their schools' distribution of resources. In addition, a lack of familial resources meant many were forced to be more autonomous in the 'choice-making process' (Reay, 1998, p. 526) than their well-supported, high attaining peers applying to 'elite' universities. By contrast, at independent school, Parklands, boys were extremely well-prepared for Oxbridge, but moderate attainers were equally prepared for their non-Oxbridge applications.

My second expectation was that although a worthy subject for research, moderately attaining sixth formers might be an uninteresting group to study. In this I was wrong. I was guilty of misreading the modesty of many 'status trained' (Hopper 1972) middle attainers and assumed, as Roberts (2012) suggests of educational researchers in general, that middle attainers were neither interesting nor spectacular (p.204). I

was to be proved wrong repeatedly over the course of my fieldwork. The moderately attaining sixth formers I interviewed emerged as a fascinating and widely diverse group of young people. Several struck me as remarkable. There were, for example, four Grade 8 musicians in this group, including a pianist, a saxophonist, a trumpet player and a jazz drummer. One moderate attainer represented her county in hockey, despite her school not teaching hockey. A rugby-playing moderate attainer discovered in sixth form that he could sing and dance. In addition, many Hallingford and St John's moderate attainers struck me as remarkable for the sheer tenacity and resourcefulness with which they tried to obtain support for their post-school choosing.

In what follows, I discuss my key findings. I conclude this chapter with a section in which I make suggestions for further research.

Differentiation in sixth form

Subject choice - tests, 'cooling out' and teacher allocation

Formal and informal selective practices at either departmental or teacher level were in operation for students' subject choosing. Generally, these practices prioritised facilitating subjects taken by high attainers, supporting the dominance of an HE discourse with a focus on Russell Group universities. Nonetheless, other factors, such as the maintenance of departmental grade averages, appeared to influence selective practices designed to 'cool out' moderate attainers.

Formally, entry to Hallingford and St John's sixth forms required five GCSE passes and a B in the subjects taken for A level. I was surprised to discover that in addition to attaining a B, students also had to sit tests in order to be eligible to study selected A levels. At both schools, students who wanted to study A Level Maths sat internal tests. At Hallingford, students also sat tests for all three Sciences. Tests for A level subjects are not mentioned on school websites, and Hallingford's Head of Sixth Form, Mr Nelson, appeared to want to downplay their significance. Subject tests were not mentioned as part of the entry criteria given in the St John's sixth form prospectus and were not alluded to during presentations given during the Sixth Form Open Evening. One Head of Maths explained that setting his own internal test was essential. He explained that coaching to ensure GCSE passes was so intensive at his

school that a 'B' at GCSE was not enough to ensure a student's 'ability' for A level. Tests at Hallingford and St John's were internally marked: there was no scrutiny of the questions set or the marking.

In addition to formal tests set by departments for facilitating subjects, informal, subjective methods were used to 'cool out' moderate attainers from certain subjects. Moderate attainers gave examples of poor treatment by teachers, inconsistent GCSE entry criteria and/or being told subjects were full or not running, as examples of the challenges they met with their subject choices. It seemed possible also that formal selection criteria were applied more strictly for some subjects than for others and, possibly, for some students. St John's moderate attainer Amy, appeared to have been 'cooled out' of A Level Maths and at Hallingford, it seemed Zane was 'cooled out' of A level Business. By contrast, although a B at GCSE was the Hallingford minimum for all A level subjects, some Hallingford students attained a C in their Sociology GCSE and were permitted to study the subject at A level.

Maintaining departmental grade averages appeared to be a reason for 'cooling out' (through verbal dissuasion and setting of tests) lower attainers from taking particular A level subjects. Two teachers, one at Hallingford and one at Parklands, described the role played by inter-departmental competition for high attainers in boosting departmental grade averages. One of these teachers explained the detrimental effect 'just one low attainer' at A level could have on his department's grade average. Hallingford moderate attainers Neena and Mahnoor both experienced bullying behaviour from teachers and being made to feel unwanted in class. Neena believed making a (moderately attaining) student want to drop a subject was a strategy employed by some teachers to maintain departmental grade averages. Generally, schools appeared more concerned about grade averages for facilitating subjects than for 'newer' subjects.

Hallingford and St John's moderate attainers who described being 'cooled out' of a subject were steered towards those with availability and/or which fitted timetables. While some subjects appeared to have a cap on student numbers, others did not. At both schools, student numbers for English, and non-facilitating, 'newer' subjects, such as Psychology and Sociology, appeared to expand to accommodate as many moderate attainers in need of a third subject as necessary. 'Cooling out' was also

used by St John's senior management to steer high attainers away from non-facilitating subjects such as Psychology and Sociology, justifying their actions with the belief that 'newer' subjects disadvantaged access to selective universities.

The allocation of teachers to subjects popular with moderate attainers appeared yet another way in which informal selective practices operated. Moderate attainers studying 'newer' and applied subjects were more likely to report problems with subjects owing to inexperienced or long-term sick teachers and/or being taught by more than one supply teacher during the academic year. St John's moderate attainer, Ella, said that students who studied 'soft' A levels were 'looked down on' at St John's. The allocation of teachers in both Hallingford and St John's suggested there was a lack of respect on the part of senior management for subjects popular with moderate attainers. None of the high attainers in my samples experienced problems with their subject choosing or teachers (see Brown, 2015).

Support for HE applicants

At both Hallingford and St John's, moderate attainers' HE and non-HE choices were marginalised by the dominance of policy discourses which valorised high attainment, the taking of facilitating A level subjects and progression to leading Russell Groups institutions. The evidence for differentiated levels of support for different attainment groups was overwhelming in both schools. My study found many ways in which informal differentiation, rather than more visible and crudely prescribed, formal selective practices, impacted on students' post-school choosing. Unlike Parklands, neither Hallingford nor St John's had a written policy on the support students could expect for their UCAS applications.

A lack of formal support for moderate attainers

At Hallingford, moderate attainers were particularly disadvantaged by the lack of formal provision of support for students' HE applications. Other than the school's UCAS day at the end of year 12, the only formal context where students might access support was during their twice weekly, 20-minute year 13 form periods. These, however, were insufficient for the delivery of quality advice and guidance for form groups of around 25 students after the everyday business of school announcements and pastoral matters had been attended to. Without officially

allocated time for the completion of UCAS applications, moderate attainers had to be especially proactive and seek support informally from form tutors or subject teachers. For all but one moderate attainer, meetings with form tutors tended to be short and perfunctory. When trying to access further help, moderate attainers reported form tutors telling them they were too 'busy' or lacked relevant subject knowledge.

In contrast to Hallingford, St John's had in place a formal system of support for all year 13 students' HE and non-HE choosing based on the separation of students into either Life Skills or Oxbridge groups. However, with Oxbridge applicants comprising just 10% of sixth formers, Life Skills form groups included a wide range of moderately attaining students who aspired to a range of Russell Group and 'new' universities, and a small number of non-conformers who sought alternatives to HE. On the surface, the allocation of an extended, once weekly Life Skills form period appeared a fairer system than Hallingford's lack of timetabled support. However, the accounts of moderate attainers who took part in my study revealed differentiated levels of support, with form tutors prioritising Russell Group applicants during Life Skills. One form tutor believed applicants to 'new' universities got in 'anyway' and did not need the level of support she gave to Russell Group applicants. Students' experiences echoed those of Hallingford moderate attainers, with form tutors 'too busy' to check UCAS applications and/or too inexperienced or unqualified to help with degree courses beyond their subject specialism. Two St John's moderate attainers said their form tutor 'rarely' or 'did not always' attend Life Skills periods. Unlike, Hallingford, St John's did offer non-Oxbridge applicants a school trip to a university. However, this was to a local non-Russell Group university and had little appeal for the moderate attainers I interviewed. Other than a single UCAS day held at the end of year 12, non-Oxbridge HE applicants at both Hallingford and St John's received no extra-curricular enhancements or opportunities designed to support their UCAS applications.

If my sample groups are indicative, the form tutor is the least likely person to support a moderately attaining student. This is despite form tutors in both Hallingford and St John's being the member of staff formally responsible for students' UCAS applications. Crucially, without the constructive support of a

teacher, moderate attainers' accounts of their HE choosing indicated that they misrecognised 'luke warm' knowledge of hearsay, 'gut feeling' and information on attractive university websites, as 'hot' knowledge (see Smith, 2011).

Oxbridge applicants prioritised

Hallingford's Oxbridge applicants benefited from a strong culture of informally delivered advice and support. An unofficial team of four, senior teachers courted potential Oxbridge applicants and supervised their applications. The pressure exerted on high attainers was such that two high attainers were persuaded to apply to Oxford even when their preferred subject was not offered by Oxford. The enhanced levels of support given to Oxbridge applicants was especially evident in the amount of time given for the drafting of students' personal statements. Oxbridge applicants also benefited from exclusive, informal support and 'sponsorship' (Reay et al, 2005) in the form of ad hoc tutorials, quality work experience and external support for their Oxbridge applications provided by a private company. In addition, they attended Sutton Trust courses and officially organised trips to Oxford and Cambridge. A sixth form 'Supper Society' exclusive to Oxbridge applicants, was designed to encourage social skills and conversation in order to prepare students for hoped-for Oxbridge interviews. Above all, high attainers could rely on senior teachers' proactivity: the progress of their applications was regularly checked and time generously given, sometimes at the expense of other (e.g. teaching) commitments.

St John's Oxbridge applicants received both high levels of formal and informal support (Reay, 2005; Oliver and Kettley, 2010). Formal support was delivered through a weekly one-hour Oxbridge tutorial supervised by senior teacher, Mr Brothers. However, this formal provision 'belied the cultures of informal advice' (Oliver and Kettley, 2010, p.738) which saw Oxbridge applicants benefiting from high levels of off-timetable support. Like Hallingford, support for high attainers' personal statements appeared limitless, with students consulting Mr Brothers for as many drafts as they felt necessary. At both schools, high attainers received such intensive support for the drafting of their personal statement writing that it is questionable how far these could be said to be their own work (Schwartz, 2004, p.26). As at Hallingford, St John's highest attainers benefited from organised trips to visit Oxford and Cambridge, and were given exclusive access to extra-curricular

events and opportunities specifically designed to enhance the content of their personal statements (see Shuker, 2014).

Most significantly, my findings revealed that the disproportionate amount of support invested into Hallingford and St John's Oxbridge applicants yielded poor returns. In addition to this investment being to the detriment of time and resources invested in other HE applicants, it did not translate into a correspondingly high number of Oxbridge offers. Twenty Hallingford high attainers in a sixth form of 271 students were coached for Oxbridge during my research. Fifteen were called for interview and two were offered places. Both turned down their offers in favour of offers from Harvard and the LSE. At St John's, out of a sixth form of 145 students, 15 students were coached for Oxbridge. Five were called for interview and two offered places. One student, who was always uncertain about Cambridge, dropped out after a term.

Coaching for the Oxbridge interview at both Hallingford and St John's appeared particularly ill-informed. My study indicated that a major hurdle for Hallingford and St John's high attainers accessing Oxbridge had less to do with student attainment or subject choice (see Fazackerley and Chant, 2008; The Sutton Trust, 2010; Boliver et al, 2017), but the level of questioning in the Oxbridge interviews, for which students felt ill-prepared. By contrast, preparation for Oxbridge at Parklands indicated that teachers had the relevant cultural capital and specialised knowledge to support students' personal statements and interview preparation.

The number of students who successfully access Oxbridge at Hallingford and especially St John's, is annually very low. This raises questions about why these schools should continue to invest so disproportionately into their Oxbridge applicants. Moderate attainers in my study believed their schools relied on Oxbridge applications as a marketing device designed to increase student numbers. The issue of preparation for Oxbridge only matters to this study because it appeared to be diverting resources away from the majority of HE applicants.

My own observations of how Hallingford and St John's differentiated support for different groups for their HE applications, coupled with moderate and high attaining students' own accounts, pointed to such practices being normalised. Senior staff and all but a small number of form tutors, who I discuss further on, did not question their

legitimacy and engaged in practices which differentiated levels of support for moderate and high attainers. Hallingford's Head of Sixth Form, Mr Nelson, and St John's Assistant Head, Mr Reid, justified higher levels of support given to Oxbridge applicants on the grounds that applying to Oxbridge was harder. They also expressed the belief that the responsibility lay with moderate attainers to be proactive in accessing help with their UCAS applications. However, the intense surveillance they exercised over Oxbridge applicants indicated that neither senior teacher trusted high attainers to be similarly proactive. As St John's form tutor, Mrs Barker observed, 'It's as if all those [students] that are incredibly bright have more fed into them [while] others are just left'.

The personal statement – a key indicator of perceived status

The personal statement, and the amount of support students given by teachers for the drafting process, emerged as a key indicator of the perceived status of a student's UCAS application and HE choice. Support for students' personal statements was sharply differentiated at Hallingford and St John's, and the injustice of this was felt keenly by moderate attainers applying to 'new' universities. At both Hallingford and St John's, there was a 'pecking order': Oxbridge applicants' personal statements were prioritised and supervised by senior teachers, followed by all other Russell Group applicants, whose personal statements were supervised by form tutors or subject teachers. Students applying to non-Russell Group universities received the least help of all.

The lack of formal support for moderate attainers applying to non-Russell Group universities meant students were forced, as in the case of Reay's (1998) working class HE applicants, to be 'more autonomous' (p.526) and resourceful. Students sought help informally from a variety of different sources. One of the major sources was family and friends, with some able to turn to graduate family members. The socio-economic and ethnic mix of my student participants meant not all university-educated parents had relevant graduate backgrounds. Two Hallingford moderate attainers had fathers who were graduates of non-UK universities and were not consulted during the HE process. However, Neena was helped 'a lot' by her sister, a graduate of a Russell Group university. At St John's, three moderate attainers, Ella, Benny and Patrick, sought help for their UCAS applications from their graduate

parents. Two of these students, Ella and Patrick, had mothers who had studied at 'new' universities, while Benny's father was a graduate of the LSE. As discussed in Chapter 7, the quality of support Benny received from his father for both his HE choosing and his personal statement was comparable to the levels of parental support high attaining Katie and Ruth were given by their Russell Group graduate parents. Middle-class St John's high attainers with graduate parents were doubly advantaged, with both school and parents investing high levels of support in their UCAS applications. As Reay et al (2005) observed of their middle-class participants, Katie and Ruth engaged in the HE process 'in contexts of certainty and entitlement' (p.62). Nonetheless, all St John's graduate parents were heavily involved in the drafting of students' personal statements, and bore resemblances to David et al's (2003) anxious and proactive middle-class mothers (p.31).

At Hallingford, friendships crossed different attainment and ethno-cultural groups, and it was noticeable that students were supportive of each other. In lieu of a graduate family background, some moderate attainers were able to turn to high attaining friends who passed on 'hot' knowledge acquired from Sutton Trust courses on writing a personal statement. Moderate attainers Hari and Mahnoor were helped by high attaining friends, Asmit and Kirti. High attainer Fahima described giving an impromptu 'lesson' on personal statement writing to a friend and then a group of moderate attainers. At St John's, however, friendships were strictly within attainment and cultural and social class groupings. This meant that except for Benny, who knew two high attaining girls outside the context of St John's through his music, there was little chance that moderate attainers would be helped by high attainers.

The most disadvantaged of all HE applicants were working class moderate attainers Amy and Zoe, of St John's. Both lacked a graduate family background and the social construction of St John's friendship groups meant they also lacked high attaining friends to help them. Without formal school support and access to informal support, Amy and Zoe's anxiety over their UCAS applications (see Reay, 1998; Archer, 2000; Reay et al, 2005) was especially evident during the drafting of their personal statements.

Two ‘exceptional’ Hallingford teachers, of which one was a form tutor, emerged who supported moderate attainers with the drafting of their personal statements. Unusually, in the context of Hallingford’s HE discourse, these teachers were motivated to help three moderate attainers applying to non-Russell Group universities.¹⁰³

The influence of teacher habitus – gatekeepers and facilitators

Lipsky’s (1980) study of ‘street-level bureaucrats’ found that when organisations such as schools and welfare agencies are under financial and resource constraints combined with pressure to meet performance targets, behaviour tends to drift towards ‘compatibility with the way an organization is evaluated’ (p.51). Practices develop whereby clients are categorised and levels of services targeted for specific categories, rather than an evaluation of individuals’ needs. Being able to rapidly sort and process clients (students) by groups allows bureaucrats (teachers) to manage demanding workloads and meet targets, with professional judgements playing an increasingly diminishing role. Arguably, when Hallingford and St John’s teachers selected which students to help, their choices were not of their own making but reflected practices which had evolved and become normalised for the expedient attainment of results supported by the HE discourses of their schools. In this context, it is easier to understand why so many moderate attainers reported being told by teachers that they were too ‘busy’ or lacked relevant of subject knowledge to help them with their personal statements, or why teachers gave their personal statements only a cursory reading. Unintentionally, or not, such responses meant teachers acted as gatekeepers to moderate attainers HE applications. High attainers, whose HE applications to Russell Group universities, and especially Oxbridge, were likely to enhance any ‘evaluation’ of their school, all described very positive relationships with teachers. They approached teachers confident in the knowledge they would be helped and teachers responded by acting as facilitators for their HE applications. St John’s moderate attainer Zoe pointed out that this had always been the case. A history of good relations between high attainers and teachers, often dating from GCSE, was not something moderate attainers had with teachers. This lack of

¹⁰³ One moderate attainer applying to a ‘new’ university was helped by Mr Nelson for reasons discussed in Chapter 5.

relationship made it all the easier for teachers to overlook them and for students to feel any request for help was ‘begging’ (Benny, St John’s).

In spite of Hallingford and St John’s strong focus on Russell Group applicants, and especially Oxbridge applicants, a small group of ‘exceptional’ teachers and ‘entrepreneurial’ form tutors were found to support moderate attainers with their HE and non-HE aspirations. Oliver and Kettley’s (2010) study first alerted me to the influence of a teacher’s habitus to facilitate or gatekeep students’ applications to ‘elite’ universities. At Parklands, the influence of a teacher’s habitus and the deployment of cultural and social capital to facilitate boys’ HE applications was evident in the quality of support given to both high and moderate attainers during the HE process. More significant to this study was the emergence of a small number of Hallingford and St John’s teachers who were facilitators for moderate attainers’ HE and non-HE aspirations. These teachers all appeared to possess an ethical disposition and took a more *socially just* approach to supporting different groups of students. In particular, they possessed the necessary cultural and social capital to advise students marginalised by their schools’ HE discourses. These teachers were ‘exceptional’ in schools where moderate attainers’ accounts revealed teachers were more likely to act as gatekeepers to their HE applications.

Rowland argues (2009) that ‘kindness’ in teachers, a love of knowledge and a concern for social justice are ‘displaced value(s)’ in schools subjected to Ball’s (2003) of ‘terrors of performativity’ (Rowland, 2009, p.207). Hallingford’s ‘exceptional’ teachers were all described by moderate attainers as showing ‘kindness’ towards them. These teachers appeared to have an ethical approach which emerged in the support they gave to moderately attaining students with their post-school choosing. Two teachers were described by moderate attainers as being especially supportive and encouraging of their UCAS applications to ‘new’ universities, and the third emerged as being particularly helpful to students who sought degrees in applied subjects or apprenticeships. Adela, Mahnoor’s and Naz’s accounts of the ‘kindness’ they were shown suggested that such treatment went beyond their everyday experiences. At St John’s, two form tutors were also found to be supportive of moderate attainers’ aspirations. However, both teachers appeared more skilled in supporting students who sought alternatives to HE.

Hallingford's Mr Riley came across as one of the most reflexive of all teachers interviewed. Mr Riley possessed a habitus which appeared in tension with the institutional habitus of his school. He did not believe 'deep down' a Russell Group university was the best choice for many in his form group and also believed that Hallingford's 'push' towards Russell Group universities was in the interests of the school rather than the students' own best interests. Mr Riley shared some of the concerns of Oliver and Kettley's (2010) 'gatekeeper' teachers who 'felt the agenda to increase student participation' to 'elite' universities had more to do with the marketisation and commodification of HE than students' interests (p.751). Mr Riley, and his colleagues form tutor Mr Douglas and senior teacher Mr Austen, all emerged as facilitators for moderate attainers' HE aspirations to non-Russell Group universities.

Form tutor Mr Douglas' active networking and generation of opportunities for moderate attainers suggested an unusually 'entrepreneurial' form tutor. To a lesser extent, Miss Greenfield and Mrs Barker of St John's were also 'entrepreneurial' form tutors. All three teachers looked beyond the context of their school to source opportunities and advice beneficial to moderate attainers who sought alternatives to HE. However, Mr Douglas' particular skill was to draw on his social capital and network with local industries. He created opportunities both for moderate attainers who aspired to university *and* those who sought alternatives. Resourceful and creative, Mr Douglas challenged Fuller et al's (2014) finding that teachers lacked confidence outside their areas of expertise when advising students on post-school choosing. Having come to teaching after a career as a research scientist, Mr Douglas appeared less socialised into the practices which characterised Hallingford's HE discourse. He enthusiastically built on his social capital by actively seeking contacts outside the school. As well as sourcing ('quality') work experience usually reserved for Hallingford high attainers, he gathered information on HE courses for which moderately attaining students were eligible. Hallingford's 'economy of student worth' (Ball et al, 1998) appeared to be the reason why Mr Douglas' work to support moderate attainers slipped 'under the radar'. The fact that surveillance was trained specifically on the HE applications of high attainers gave Mr Douglas the freedom to carry out his work without appearing to challenge Hallingford's HE discourse.

Mr Douglas's ethical position was clear from his distaste for any school practice that risked making a student feel they were 'worth less' than another. Similarly, St John's Mrs Barker believed it was 'elitist' to prioritise high attainers and their HE applications. In addition, St John's form tutor Miss Greenfield, and Head of Sixth Form, Mrs Jay's work to support non-conformers, suggested teachers with a more inclusive approach. It seemed possible for 'exceptional' teachers in possession of a certain type of teacher habitus to circumnavigate the HE discourses of their schools and make possible a 'bivalent' social justice (Fraser, 1996). Not only did these teachers redress the maldistribution of resources for students' post-school choosing but their work meant moderate attainers felt recognised and their aspirations valued. Nonetheless, only moderate attainers who were, by chance, in these teachers' form groups, or taught by Hallingford senior teacher Mr Austen, were likely to be able to access their support. Although 'exceptional' teachers were seen to play a part in ensuring a more socially distribution of resources, they acted as facilitators for the HE and non-HE aspirations of a relatively small number of 'lucky' Hallingford and St John's moderate attainers.

At Parklands, the influence of teachers as facilitators for moderate attainers' HE choosing was more straightforward. The influence of teacher habitus, coupled with the enhanced cultural capital of individual subject specialists, was evident in the high levels of support for HE applications in both the creative arts and traditional, academic subjects. Further, the use of subject specialists avoided the possibility of inexperienced teachers, or teachers who lacked relevant subject knowledge, being responsible for students' UCAS applications. In addition, the use of subject specialists meant boys' whose HE applications required both a personal statement and an audition were as well prepared as Oxbridge applicants for their personal statements and interviews. At Hallingford, Fahima appeared to have sensed the need for teachers with the right type of cultural capital when she described knowing only one Hallingford teacher who spoke the 'same language' as the Oxford academics who interviewed her at Oxford (see Zimdars, Sullivan and Heath, 2009). The support described by high and moderately attaining Parklands boys highlighted the value of being supported by teachers with relevant cultural capital, 'hot' knowledge and expertise and, above all, the motivation to advise each boy on his HE application.

The lack of formal support for non-conformers

Another key finding in this study was the existence of 10 Hallingford and St John's students who did not conform to the HE discourse of their schools and sought alternatives to university. The number of non-conformers was unexpected because I was researching in school sixth forms where students were expected to progress to university, and where progression to Russell Group universities was important for sixth form marketing. Five non-conformers left school at the end of year 12 to go to college or to start an apprenticeship. The five non-conformers who completed their sixth form were among the most marginalised of all students in the allocation of sixth form resources for post-school choosing.

The lack of formal support for non-conformers revealed a major gap in the provision for students' post school choosing. At Hallingford, there was no official careers service for sixth formers; at St John's, only three moderate attainers out of the 13 who completed sixth form were aware that the school had a part-time, contracted-in careers adviser. Two moderate attainers who sought advice from the careers adviser received little practical help. At Hallingford, the member of staff with responsibility for apprenticeships was not qualified to give careers advice and appeared to lack resources to be able to properly support students interested in apprenticeships (Chadderton, 2015; Fuller et al, 2014).

Further, the 'stigma' of going to college, coupled with an HE discourse which saw a 'push' towards Russell Group universities (from as early as year 9 at Hallingford), appeared to make choosing a college course unimaginable for moderate attainers, even when their aptitudes would have been better served by an FE college. Head of St John's Sixth Form, Mrs Jay's efforts to expand provision of support for non-conformers included inviting an FE college to present during St John's UCAS day. However, her actions were out of step with the HE discourse of the school and the 'push' towards university, and in direct opposition to the school's senior management who wanted additional resources to be targeted at increasing numbers to Oxbridge.

The absence of careers advice meant non-conformers needed to be especially resourceful in accessing support for their post-school choosing. Non-conformers in

this study were predominantly white and working class; crucially, they came from families with deep roots in the local area and local employment. For advice on their post-school choosing, non-conformers turned to families and/or social networks with ‘hot’ knowledge about apprenticeships and college courses unrecognised by their schools. Buoyed by their familial habitus, non-conformers could take pride in their post-school choices. Even St John’s Simon, whose rejection of university was out of step with his family’s aspirational habitus, was helped by his father’s social network to secure an apprenticeship. It seemed that some non-conformers were able to withstand being marginalised by the HE discourse of their school because it was irrelevant to their post-school aspirations. Only Hallingford’s Kyle, whose working class Polish family lacked useful social capital, was forced to find his apprenticeship independently online.

The majority of Hallingford and St John’s non-conformers appeared reluctant to draw attention to their non-conformity. The dominance of the HE discourse of their schools was possibly why most non-conformers wanted to ‘pass’ as university applicants. They talked about ‘uni’ as a ‘possibility’ throughout sixth form, and two completed UCAS applications, in spite of always being uncertain about university. Non-conformer Simon’s ‘gap year option’ meant he ‘passed’ as a potential HE applicant with his parents and family friends. In school, Simon took advantage of his form tutor’s focus on Russell Group applicants and ‘passed’ as a student completing his UCAS application by ‘looking busy’ on his laptop. As Leary (1999) describes, the act of ‘passing’ is a form of ‘self-protection’, or ‘camouflage to sequester the self from expected trauma’ (p.85). Hallingford moderate attainer Stacey was the only non-conformer who refused to pass as an HE applicant. As her experiences with Mr Nelson testify, to be openly non-conformist in Hallingford meant laying oneself open to challenge and ‘harassment’ (Stacey). Similarly, St John’s Simon alluded to enormous ‘pressures’ from parents who wanted him to apply to university. These were only alleviated when Simon started to pass as an HE applicant.

The experience of being a moderate attainer

All moderately attaining sixth formers experienced frustration and hurt as a result of school sixth forms where high attainment and progression to selective universities were prioritised. The casual differentiation of support for differently attaining groups

was made possible by school cultures where the celebration of high attainers and their achievements was normalised. At St John's, moderate attainers spoke of assemblies as 'platforms' for the continuous mentioning, commending and rewarding of high academic attainment. At Hallingford, moderate attainers moved through corridors where displays served as constant reminders of former A* students and their progression to Russell Group universities. St John's moderate attainers felt non-academic achievements, such as music and sport, went unrecognised. Grade 8 musician Ella had been excluded from St John's sixth form G&T because she studied 'soft' A level subjects. At St John's, Zoe gave examples of students such as herself who played sport at a national and/or international level and who had never been acknowledged in school assemblies. Such practices were in sharp contrast to the experiences of two Parklands moderate attainers who felt highly valued because of the 'contribution' they made to 'the wider life of the school'. Moderate attainer and jazz drummer Danny, and sportsman and actor Zac, had a status in their school which St John's moderate attainers, musician Ella and sportswoman Zoe, did not. Perhaps because both girls felt they were not 'recognised' for their non-academic achievements, Ella and Zoe were among the most vocal in their feelings about the preferential treatment given to high attainers at their school. Zoe protested angrily at being expected to 'look up to' high attaining 'elites'. She felt high attainers were 'mollycoddled' by teachers and that in comparison students like her were 'just scum'. Similarly, Ella was withering in her description of her teachers' 'reverence' of high attainers. The preferential treatment of Hallingford and St John's high attainers went far beyond support for students' HE applications. The valorising of high attainers and their achievements suggested an institutional insensitivity to the feelings of moderate attainers and a failure to see young people as anything other than academic attainers.

Students' experiences of the HE discourses of their schools

The majority of moderate attainers experienced a lack of support for their HE and non-HE choosing but they responded in different ways. Many were frustrated about being 'looked over' (Benny) and some were angry that they and their HE applications were relegated to the 'bottom of the pile' (Ella). Moderate attainers' frequent use of the term 'kids like us' or 'kids like me' suggested they understood

they were seen as *different* from high attainers. When non-conforming moderate attainer Erica expressed the belief that St John's did not 'care' about 'we in-the-middle-kids', she stated as fact that St John's 'obviously car[ed]' about 'bright kids' progressing to Oxbridge. The reason so little 'care' was invested in moderate attainers, she believed, was because their post-school destinations did not matter to the school. Erica's negative experiences of being a moderately attaining sixth former at John's prompted her to leave for college at the end of year 12.

Moderate attainers Patrick and Zane appeared resigned when their attempts to get help with their personal statements were met with a teacher's lack of interest. At one level, the boys' acceptance indicated that they had been 'status trained' (Hopper, 1972) and the treatment they received no more than they expected. However, the lack of support they were given for their specialised degree courses in Computer Science and Sonic Arts respectively, motivated them to become 'independent choosers'.¹⁰⁴ Both boys conducted extensive research into their post-school options unassisted by their schools. Zane was helped by his social network of musician friends who advised on both his HE choices and his initial interest in an apprenticeship. Patrick emerged as the most self-reliant of all HE applicants. He was discerning in his use of online research, and combined it with several university visits. More commonly in St John's, moderate attainers were aggrieved by the practices integral to the school's HE discourse which saw support for their post-school choosing marginalised. Amy, Benny, Vicky and Zoe all complained about the discrepancies in the levels of support given to high attainers and 'kids like us'. They knew their school favoured high attainers and gave as evidence the higher levels of support given to higher attainers for the drafting of their personal statements. Most moderate attainers also understood that high attainers and their HE destinations constituted valuable marketing for St John's. However, most St John's moderate attainers did not show the critical insight into the selective practices integral to their school's HE discourse which Ella demonstrated. Ella classified as a 'critical' student, protesting that St John's 'was not Eton' and its preferential treatment of Oxbridge applicants unjust and disproportionate. She also believed that St John's failure to promote apprenticeships and motivation to 'push' university was because students

¹⁰⁴ See Appendix Q where I give a breakdown of students' responses to the HE discourses by school.

who aspired to HE were incentivised to attain A grades, and schools needed to ‘publicise their success rates’.

Hallingford moderate attainers Neena and Mahnoor fully understood that Head of Sixth Form, Mr Nelson, was selective in his approach to supporting HE applicants and sought help for their UCAS applications elsewhere. All the same, Neena was a ‘conformer’ to Hallingford’s HE discourse, and disappointed when she did not attain the grades to progress to a Russell Group university. Mahnoor, however, was critical. She showed the same kind of insight into Mr Nelson’s ‘elitism’ - i.e. the preferential treatment of high and middle class attainers - as ‘critical’ high attainers, Asmit, Fahima, Kirti and Sumeer. Mahnoor’s observation that teachers spoke to poshly-spoken moderate attainer Tim but not to ‘kids like me’, was a painful reminder of what it was like to be a working-class moderate attainer in Hallingford’s sixth form. Mahnoor described being subjected to selective practices which went beyond the distribution of resources for her UCAS application. Her response was to be proactive and seek help with her UCAS application from ‘kind’ Mr Austen and her high attaining friend, Kirti. Asmit and Fahima also acted on their feelings about the injustice integral to Hallingford’s HE discourse and helped their moderately attaining friends. The recognition Mr Austen and Kirti gave Mahnoor’s HE aspirations meant her experiences of the HE process was more positive than aggrieved Adela, who appeared not to understand why Mr Nelson was so disinclined to invest ‘care’ into her UCAS application. Naz was also aggrieved about the level of support he received from his form tutor for his UCAS application. Like Mahnoor, Naz became proactive and sought help from Mr Austen. However, Naz did not show the same level of insight as Mahnoor into the reasons behind the disparity in levels of support given to different groups of HE applicants.

Strong emotions were especially evident in moderate attainers’ final interviews during which all except the three Hallingford moderate attainers helped by Mr Nelson described the difficulties they experienced accessing support for their UCAS applications. St John’s Benny resented being made to feel he was ‘begging’ for help. At Hallingford, Naz’s anger over his form tutor’s perfunctory approach to advising him was sharpened by his indignation over being ‘given’ HE choices Naz found shameful. Similarly, Zoe was indignant over her form tutor’s refusal to help her, and

the implication that she wanted her personal statement written for her. Ella's anger was targeted at the school's preferential treatment of Oxbridge students. The unfairness of being made to feel 'needy' or 'begging' for help was felt all the more keenly because moderate attainers saw that teachers never denied high attainers' requests for help.

Stacey was the only non-conformer who refused to pass as an HE applicant. Her pride in her working-class habitus meant she was confident in her rejection of university and unashamed about wanting to study makeup. Stacey's refusal to pass meant her rejection of HE was visibly out of step with Hallingford's HE discourse and provoked what she described as 'harassment' from Mr Nelson. When Stacey became angry over how she was treated it was because she sensed Mr Nelson's pressure to get her to apply to HE was bound up in his disapproval of her 'working class' aspirations. Stacey sensed that Mr Nelson's middle-class habitus meant that he did not recognise her post-school choice as having any value. Stacey classified as my only 'rebel non-conformer'.

Reay et al (2005) describe the 'powerfully emotive language' of working class HE choosers whose anxieties showed they felt conflicted about progressing to university (p.101). Since Reay et al's study, many more young people currently progress to HE and, in schools such as Hallingford and St John's, all students are actively encouraged to apply.¹⁰⁵ For moderately attaining Hallingford and St John's HE applicants, their anxiety was less about progressing to university than it was the lack of help to get them get there. In addition, although most non-conformers played down their non-conformity and passed as HE applicants, the majority of moderate attainers in this study displayed a strong certainty about their post-school choices and took pride in their final destinations. The exceptions were St John's non-conformer Simon who felt unable to take pride in his apprenticeship in car sales, and Hallingford non-conformer Dale, who was still looking for a position one year after leaving school.

¹⁰⁵ See Chapter 2 - 48% of young people under 30 currently progress to HE (DfE, 2017a).

Concluding thoughts

I spent two years in the field. I was disturbed by the range of discriminatory practices in Hallingford and St John's sixth forms which marginalised moderately attaining sixth formers and their post-school aspirations. These ranged from the formally selective to a myriad of informal practices. The over-arching 'driver' of selective practices in both schools appeared to be the policy of fair access which was being crudely translated into the prioritisation of high attaining students and their HE aspirations. The dominance of HE discourses in both Hallingford and St John's with a focus on progression to Russell Group universities, and the prioritising of Oxbridge universities above all, marginalised moderately attaining students who aspired to less selective universities or alternatives to HE. Students' responses to the HE discourses of their schools ranged from 'conformers' who applied to university and voiced no concerns about differentiated levels of support to HE applicants who were 'critical' or 'aggrieved'. My study also showed that the prioritisation of high attainers coloured every aspect of sixth form life, with Hallingford and St John's high attainers enjoying privileges of friendship and emotional support from teachers which extended beyond the needs of their UCAS applications.

Many moderate attainers believed their schools privileged high attainers as a direct result of pressures of a competitive sixth form market. They understood the 'economy of student worth' (Ball et al, 1998) which meant such students and their progression to Russell Group universities represented more 'value' to their schools than they did, boosting performance figures and attracting students. The unfairness of privileging any one group raises questions. Principally, why Hallingford and St John's gave the most support to the very students whose attainment suggested they were highly capable of making their UCAS applications independently. At the very least, moderate attainers deserved equal amounts of support: in any other learning context, teachers are expected to target support to ensure *all* students feel valued and are able to make progress. Moderate attainers form the majority of many sixth forms and, as one senior St John's teacher pointed out, they bring in a lot of money. Nonetheless, at Hallingford and St John's, investment in their post-school aspirations came second to the relatively tiny proportion of high attaining Oxbridge hopefuls.

Moderate attainers proved a fascinating group to study and my affection and respect for this group grew the more I learnt about them. In particular, the more I came to understand some of the practical and emotional challenges of being a moderate attainer in schools which prioritised the needs and HE aspirations of high attainers. The determination of moderate attainers to get to their post-school destinations, in spite of a lack of encouragement and support, alone means they deserve our attention. It was, after all, only in the context of Hallingford and St John's that these students were 'moderate' attainers. Given the same investment of time and other resources that Parklands moderate attainers received, it is tempting to wonder what choices Hallingford and St John's moderate attainers might have made. Certainly, their journeys through the HE process would have been less traumatic.

All but Hallingford's Dale and St John's Simon progressed to post-school destinations of which they were proud. However, few moderately attaining HE applicants could be said to have had the necessary support to make informed HE choices. St John's Benny, who was supported throughout the HE process by his Russell Group graduate father, was the exception. At Hallingford, five out of the eight students who progressed to university found their places through Clearing. St John's Amy and Ella and Hallingford's Adela, all discussed the attraction of apprenticeships but lacked sufficient information to feel it was a 'safe' choice. Within the HE discourse of their sixth forms also, the status attributed to 'going to uni' was something desired by moderate attainers. Even those who were uncertain or intended to choose an alternative, chose to pass as a university applicant. Stacey's confident rejection of 'uni' was only possible because in her social world 'uni' did not have the same kind of status. In addition, her brother's student debt and his under-employment as a letting agent made Stacey question the 'value' of a degree. What the future holds for moderate attainers who have progressed to university, and the debts they will accrue while a student, is something I can only guess. It is possible some or all, will excel. However, while Britton et al's (2016) study shows that university graduates earn more than non-graduates, it also shows that the advantages of university depend on the subject studied and university type. Degrees in the creative arts and vocational subjects studied at non-selective universities rank low in graduate earnings (de Vries, 2014). Stacey's refusal to consider a degree in makeup was well-informed and probably wise.

It is a cliché to end a piece of work saying what a privilege it has been to work with my research participants, but I do feel especially lucky to have found myself researching a group who are so rarely the focus of attention. All moderate attainers, including the more privileged boys at Parklands, were a joy to research and had much to tell me. They surprised and moved me by turn; in some cases, they made me laugh out loud. Stacey's battles with Mr Nelson deserved a chapter all of their own, but then so did Simon's quiet and unhappy determination to find an alternative to 'uni', as did Parklands' 'maverick' jazz drummer, Danny. I am then reminded of Ella, Erica and Zane's unrecognised passion for music, and Zac and Zoe's stories of what it feels like to excel at sport - which reminds me of Benny's determination to study subjects despite an impractical timetable and Amy's battles with her subject choices. Nor can I forget Mahnoor and Neena's perseverance in their subjects, in spite of bullying teachers. Naz's proud refusal to be cowed by his form tutor's lack of interest in his HE choices also comes vividly to mind. I had to make some painful cuts to this thesis but I hope I have done justice to *all* moderate attainers' experiences and the battles they had to get to their post-school destinations in two school sixth forms. Most of all, I hope that I might have encouraged others to remove their gaze from the minority of high attaining students in English state schools and their access to 'elite' universities. There is a rich seam of research waiting to be tapped in the experiences and aspirations of moderately attaining sixth formers.

Further research

When I embarked on my research, I chose three school sixth forms for the comparisons I might make. I did not expect multi-ethnic comprehensive Hallingford and Church academy St John's with its predominantly white, and broadly middle-class student population, to share such similar HE discourses and practices of differentiation. It was a surprise, but suggests that there needs to be further research to establish whether similar HE discourses and patterns of selection and differentiation occur across a wider range of sixth forms and colleges.

My study indicated the influence of a teacher's habitus to facilitate students' applications to less selective universities and vocational or applied courses. Equally important would be an examination of reasons why some teachers may act as

gatekeepers to moderate attainers' HE choices. Research which throws light on types of teacher habitus, why some teachers conform to or reject HE policy discourses, and why some teachers are more motivated to support some students more than others with their HE applications, would indicate ways in which the organisation of support for all students' HE applications might be improved.

Another finding which emerged during my research was the poverty of independent careers advice in schools. If, as Callender and Mason's (2017) research indicates, students from lower socio-economic groups are being deterred from applying to university owing to fear of student debt, providing impartial careers advice will become increasingly important. Hallingford appeared unaware of the statutory requirement to provide independent careers advice for sixth formers. Further research is needed into students who seek alternatives to HE in school and sixth form colleges, what careers advice is provided for school and college sixth formers, how students currently access information on alternatives to HE, and how successful students are in accessing alternatives to HE which offer training and prospects for future employment.

Another key finding which would seem to warrant urgent further research is sixth form subject choice. Students' experiences of studying at sixth form level will influence their decisions about future progression. Should they choose to progress to HE, the subject they study in sixth form will be a key determinant of their choice of degree. More research is needed into the sorting of students by subject on entry to sixth form. St John's moderate attainer Ella spoke of students who studied 'soft' A levels, such as Sociology, being 'looked down on'. At both Hallingford and St John's it also seemed that English was used to 'mop up' moderate attainers who needed a subject to make up their A level quota. The perceived status of different subjects within schools, the different formal and informal ways in which sixth formers are 'warmed up' and 'cooled out' for their subject choices, and how some subjects may be used to absorb moderate attainers 'cooled out' of their first-choice subjects, all deserve further research. I have suggested that school HE discourses, influenced by the fair access policy, play a significant role. However, the influence of inter-departmental rivalry and anxiety over grade averages, making high attainers

more attractive (see Brown, 2015), are also important. Further research might investigate how these two factors inter-relate in different sixth form environments.

The recent introduction of a performance measure based on students gaining at least AAB in two facilitating subjects has the potential to reinforce selective practices which sort students by subject. It may also restrict the range of ‘newer’ and applied A level subjects offered by schools and which are popular with many moderate attainers. The absence of these subjects and their teachers will almost invariably limit students’ awareness of the range of subjects available at university and their ability to make well-informed post-school choices.

Finally, how schools choose to respond to a policy designed to encourage a greater uptake of facilitating subjects will be an important new area worthy of study. In particular, how the new policy impacts on the setting of subject entrance tests designed to preserve facilitating subjects for high attainers.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

An explanation of 'elite', 'Russell Group' and 'new' universities

'Elite' universities

In addition to the government's use of 'top third' universities as a category within the destination data that schools and college sixth forms submit annually, the literature on fair access uses several terms to describe the most selective universities: 'competitive', 'elite', 'prestigious', 'leading', 'top' and 'Russell Group' universities. Often, these terms are not defined, nor is it made clear which selective universities qualify for which term. However, there are some exceptions. For example, in their study of the impact of the geographical accessibility of universities on HE choice, Gibbons and Vignoles (2009) define 'high quality' universities 'as those receiving a top 20% Research Assessment Exercise grading averaged across all academic departments' (p.15). In contrast, Boliver (2013) defines 'more prestigious' universities as those which make up the Russell Group, while the Sutton Trust (2011) focuses on the thirty most selective universities in Britain, which include Russell Group institutions. Boliver describes the Russell Group as one 'remarkably successful in its efforts to promote itself as representing the UK's 'elite' and 'leading' universities' (p.349).

Clearly, there is not a single officially agreed definition of 'elite' universities. By the time of my research, the schools in which I was working appeared to reserve the term 'elite' for the most prestigious Russell Group universities. Therefore, unless otherwise specified, I use the term 'elite' to refer to those universities which the teachers in my three schools appeared to believe most prestigious. It was for applications to these institutions that the greatest amount of school resources were targeted, and/or for which high attaining students were actively encouraged to apply. Universities considered 'elite' by the three schools in which I conducted research were:

Cambridge and Oxford, followed by Durham and Imperial.

The Russell Group

The 'Russell Group', comprises the following 24 research-led universities:

Birmingham, Bristol, Cambridge, Cardiff, Durham, Edinburgh, Exeter, Glasgow, Imperial, King's College London, Leeds, Liverpool, LSE, Manchester, Newcastle, Nottingham, Oxford, Queen Mary's London, Queen's Belfast, Sheffield, Southampton, UCL, Warwick, York.

A self-selected membership group, the 'Russell Group' is frequently used as policy shorthand for 'selective desirable education' (Clark et al, 2015, np). However, not all courses at all Russell Group universities are highly selective all of the time, and there are some exceptionally selective courses at non-Russell Group institutions (Clark et al, 2015, para. 3.3).

The Sutton 13

The 'Sutton Trust 13' is a group of UK universities identified by The Sutton Trust as the UK's most selective universities:

Birmingham, Bristol, Cambridge, Durham, Edinburgh, Imperial, LSE, Nottingham, Oxford, St Andrews, UCL, Warwick and York.

(De Vries, 2014, p.17)

Jerrim (2013) explains that the Sutton Trust 13 is a group of 13 universities the selectivity of which is estimated by comparison with the most selective universities in the United States, according to the Barron Index (p.11). Jerrim states: 'in both countries, just five per cent of young people have entered one of these "selective" universities by age 20', and there the link between high household income and elite university entry is very similar in England and the United States (p.11).

The Sutton Trust 30

This groups comprises 30 highly selective universities in Scotland, England and Wales, including universities which specialise in vocational degrees, such as engineering and computer sciences. The *Times University Guide* lists the 30 most selective universities as:

Bath, Birmingham, Bristol, Cambridge, Cardiff, Durham, Edinburgh, Exeter, Glasgow, Imperial College, King's College London, Lancaster, Leeds, Leicester, Liverpool, LSE, Manchester, Newcastle, Nottingham, Oxford, Reading, Royal Holloway, London, Sheffield, Southampton, St Andrews, Strathclyde, Surrey, UCL, Warwick, York

(The Sutton Trust, 2011, p.17)

Selective, non-Russell Group universities

Red brick - 'long-established' or 'good' - non-Russell Group universities formed an important part of the HE choices available to moderately attaining sixth formers. Generally, these institutions tend to be less selective than Russell Group universities but more selective than most post-1992 'new' universities. Set up during the expansion of universities in the 1960s, examples of 'good' universities in which Hallingford and St John's moderate attainers expressed an interest and/or to which they applied, included Aston, Bath, Brunel, City, East Anglia, Essex, Keele, Kent, Lancaster, Loughborough, Reading, Surrey, Sussex. As with the universities which form the Russell Group, some 'good' universities are more selective than others.

Clark et al (2015) point out ‘there are some exceptionally selective courses at non-Russell Group institutions’ (Clark et al, 2015, para. 3.3), with some non-Russell Group universities known for their particular specialism. For example, Bath and Aston specialise in the sciences and other applied subjects. Loughborough is known for its sports and related degrees.

‘New’ Universities

The term ‘new’ university refers to former polytechnics, teacher training and other Higher Education colleges given university status post-1992. This is a large group, some members of which, e.g. Oxford Brookes, are deemed more selective than others. Others offer more general provision, and often, but not exclusively, for the local community. Bournemouth, Brighton, Chester, Chichester, Derby, Greenwich, Hertfordshire, Kingston, Liverpool John Moores, Nottingham Trent, Plymouth, Portsmouth, Roehampton, and St Mary’s Twickenham are all examples of ‘new’ universities in which moderate attainers who took part in my research expressed interest and/or to which they applied. Some students referred to the ‘new’ universities to which they aspired as ‘ordinary’.

APPENDIX B

An explanation of Level 3 qualifications

At the time of writing up my thesis all level 3 qualifications were in the process of reform with an increasing focus on academic subjects, written exams and, where relevant, the reduction or withdrawal of coursework and practical work. At the time of my research, Applied A levels, taken by many *moderate attainers* were being phased out (*see later*).

‘Facilitating’ and ‘soft’ A level subjects

The Russell Group university’s downloadable publication *Informed Choices* advises students that some courses may require one or two ‘facilitating’ subjects.

Subjects that can be viewed as facilitating subjects are:

- Mathematics and Further Mathematics
- English Literature Physics
- Biology
- Chemistry
- Geography
- History
- Languages (Classical and Modern)

The Russell Group’s *Informed Choices* advises student to check university websites for any subject preferences. However, not all university websites are clear about their requirements and, increasingly, universities refer students back to *Informed Choices* for advice on subject choices. Oxford and Cambridge, updated information on their subject preferences by the time I came to write up my thesis. Oxford Colleges now provide a table of subject requirements with subjects listed as ‘essential’, ‘recommended’ and ‘helpful’ for individual degrees course. Cambridge Colleges provide similar information, although some colleges are much clearer than others about their preferences. Trinity is the the most comprehensive and clear and provides a reminder of facilitating subjects plus a list of ideal subject combinations for popular degree choices. On the other hand, in spite of several links promising ‘A level requirements’, King’s, Cambridge, does not provide information on preferred and ‘non-preferred’ subjects. The LSE provides a page, clearly indicated, with a full list of ‘preferred’ and ‘non-preferred’ subjects

During the course of my research, and before universities had updated their websites to refer students to *Informed Choices*, there appeared to be confusion among some students who did not understand the full implication of the term ‘preferred subjects’. One research participant interviewed during the first term of her year 12 read the

‘preferred’ subjects for medicine on Cambridge and UCL’s websites literally. She explained she understood this to mean subjects which were ‘not essential but *preferred*’ (Adela, Hallingford, *Adela’s emphasis*). By this, the student made clear to me she did not believe her A levels in Biology, English Literature and Psychology would be an obstacle to studying medicine, provided her grades were sufficiently high.¹⁰⁶

‘Soft’ A level subjects

‘Soft’ subjects are non-facilitating subjects. They may be referred to in the literature as ‘newer’, ‘modern’, ‘non-preferred’, or ‘less effective preparation’ subjects. University websites which specify subject preferences usually refer to ‘preferred’ and ‘non-preferred’ subjects. For example, the LSE’s website states: ‘We consider traditional academic subjects to be the best preparation for studying at LSE (...//) Some subjects provide a less effective preparation for study at LSE. We refer to these as non-preferred subjects’ (<http://www.lse.ac.uk/study-at-lse/Undergraduate/Prospective-Students/How-to-Apply/Entry-Requirements>). Applicants are also directed to departmental web pages for specific subject requirements.

Applied A levels

At the time of writing, Applied A levels were being phased out. In future, students will choose between linear A levels or a new style vocational BTEC, which entails less coursework and more examined content. Applied A levels were still being studied by some *moderate attainers* at the time of my research. They comprised a unit based vocational qualifications split over two years - much as the modular A level was split into AS and A level. Deemed slightly lower in academic status than a traditional A level, owing to the ‘applied’ (practical) element of the syllabus, Applied A levels were also deemed higher in status than the vocational BTEC.

BTECs

BTEC stands for Business and Technology Education Council. BTECs are described as specialist work-related, or ‘applied’ qualifications and can be studied to Level 2 and Level 3.

Some Hallingford students studied for a BTEC qualifications as well as Applied A levels or A levels.

During the course of my research, students studying BTEC qualifications were examined through coursework and some examined content. Reforms being phased at the time of writing included a higher examined content. Popular BTECS studied at Hallingford included BTEC business, ICT and Science.

¹⁰⁶ The wording on a number of university websites has since been updated. UCL now state that Biology and Chemistry A level must be studied with a third A level which may be ‘any subject other than General Studies or Critical Thinking’ (UCL Medical School Admissions)

The Extended Project Qualification (EPQ)

The EPQ is a Level 3 qualification taken in addition to A levels. It is graded A* to E. Depending on the grade awarded, the EPQ may earn anything from 70 to 20 extra UCAS points. The EPQ is marked internally and submitted to the examining body which then requests a sample of papers for moderation. Most universities take into consideration the EPQ grade when making an offer (i.e. when stipulating the three A level grades, or number of total UCAS points necessary to be accepted). Not all schools submit pupils for the EPQ. In some schools only high attainers are permitted to submit an EPQ. At Parklands, the Parklands Extended Project (PEP) is used as preparation for university study. It does not earn UCAS points but the top three PEPs each year are awarded cash prizes.

APPENDIX C

Definitions of Social Class

The literature refers to ‘disadvantaged’ ‘working class’ students and students from ‘lower socio-economic background’ without always clarifying how these terms are used. Since 2002, applicants making a university application through the University and Colleges Admission Service (UCAS) have been asked for parental occupation or, if over age 21, for the occupation of the person contributing the highest income to the household. Both the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) and UCAS use a simplified version of the Registrar-General's Social Classes, comprising seven groups for the purposes of their ‘definitions and benchmark factors’.

1. Higher managerial and professional occupations
2. Lower managerial and professional occupations
3. Intermediate occupations
4. Small employers and own-account workers
5. Lower supervisory and technical occupations
6. Semi-routine occupations
7. Routine occupations

In Chapter 2, I use the terms ‘working class’ and ‘middle class’ to reflect their use in the literature. Elsewhere, my use of the terms ‘working class’ and ‘middle class’ reflect how my participants self-identified. In some cases, students were vague about (usually) a father’s job. I could not be wholly sure if the position described was Group (2) or Group (5). For example, one St John’s student described her father’s occupation as ‘working in IT’ and another described their father as a ‘kind of accountant’. The mother of another St John’s student was divorced and worked as a part-time librarian; yet another had a father who was a self-employed professional musician and his mother a part-time physiotherapist. Some students referred to themselves as ‘working class’; no student self-identified as ‘middle class’.

Further, some of the students in my samples came from migrant families whose parental occupation placed them in Groups (4), (5), (6) or (7), belying their graduate status from universities outside the UK. The parents of one Black boy, a student at St John’s, had both been educated at university in Nigeria and were employed in working class jobs. His father worked ‘in Tesco’ and his mother was a cashier in a bank. Two students at Hallingford had fathers who had been educated at non-UK universities. One was disabled and did not work and the other ran a grocery shop.

Where social class was unclear, I used a conglomerate of information about parental education background and employment, coupled with HESA and UCAS’s ‘definitions and benchmark factors’, to inform my classification of social class. In all cases, where I use the term ‘working class’, I mean groups of lower socio-economic status.

APPENDIX D

The UCAS application process

Every student must apply to university through the online University and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) application process. Completing the UCAS application is usually carried out in the first term of a student's final year of sixth form, Year 13.¹⁰⁷ The online application is a relatively easy process. Students enter their personal details, academic qualifications to date and predicted grades for qualifications being studied. They follow this with a choice of five degree courses, usually at five different institutions of Higher Education. Students uncertain about what to study or where to go, can enter predicted grades and subject interests and a list of suggested university and degree choices will appear, from which they may choose. Within these five choices, students are encouraged to apply for one 'aspirational' or 'first' choice. This will be the most desired university course and usually one demanding the highest entry qualifications. Students are encouraged to include an 'insurance' choice; that is, a university/degree course with the most generous (lowest) entry qualifications.

The personal statement

As part of their UCAS application, students submit a 4,000 character personal statement. A non-academic indicator of suitability for their degree course, the personal statement is a piece of writing in which students write about themselves with the express purpose of illustrating their suitability for the degree course(s) to which they are applying. It forms part of the UCAS application and is considered in combination with a school reference and the student's predicted A level grades.

A recent addition to the UCAS website is a worksheet with guidelines for students on how to write a personal statement. Had this worksheet been available when my research was being conducted, it is likely that it would have helped *moderate attainers* in my study who lacked the support of a teacher or university educated family member when drafting their personal statement.

(see UCAS.com, <https://www.ucas.com/file/4261/download?token=u7I6M9Q5> and Warwick.ac.uk's guide to the personal statement, https://warwick.ac.uk/study/undergraduate/apply/tips/uow_personal_statement_guide_online.pdf)

¹⁰⁷ Students intending to apply for medicine or Russell Group universities usually start to prepare for their UCAS in Year 12. In year 13, school sixth forms often provide these higher attaining students with extra-curricular activities and/or special coaching designed to enhance A level grades and material for their personal statement. In some schools, extra support is also given to *high attaining* students selected to submit an 'Extended Project Qualification' (the 'EPQ', for which extra UCAS points are awarded).

A UCAS ‘offer’

A UCAS offer refers to the entry requirements for a university place. An ‘offer’ is sent after a member of the university admissions team or an admissions tutor has considered a student’s UCAS application. An offer usually takes the form of three A level grades which a student must attain in order to take up the place.

Clearing

From July to September, UCAS displays live updates of all courses with available places alongside the telephone number for the relevant university’s Clearing ‘hotline’. Students who have not attained sufficiently to be accepted on to their first or insurance university choices (or who have changed their mind about their chosen degree) can use a UCAS search facility to find courses in their preferred subject with entry requirements that match their A levels grades. Students then ring the relevant university’s Clearing hotline to apply for the place. Sometimes, a mini interview is conducted over the phone; otherwise, if the student has the necessary grades and places are still available, the student will be automatically offered a place. The student then enters the course details and re-submits their UCAS application, just as they did for their original choices. Confirmation of their place is given through the UCAS system and by email, usually within a couple of days.

Adjustment

If a student meets and exceeds the grades of their original ‘first choice’ UCAS university place, they have five days to research an alternative without losing their original place.

APPENDIX E

Original Research Questions

- What sorts of mechanisms are used to select ‘Russell Group’ candidates, and/or to categorise sixth formers?
- Does support for university choice-making differ for the ‘A*’ and ‘B’ student and, if so, how and in what ways?
- What is the nature of advice and guidance given to ‘B students’ when making their university choices, and how do they experience and feel about the process of university choice-making?

Originally, I used the term ‘B’ student to reflect the terminology used by Hallingford and St John’s for students of moderate attainment. Early on my research, I chose to use instead *moderate attainer* to describe students whose GCSE attainment on entering sixth form ranged from As and Bs at the higher end to Bs and Cs, at the lower end of moderate GCSE attainment. In addition, some moderately attaining students attained a more diverse mix of higher and lower grade GCSEs.

APPENDIX F

Safeguarding at St John's and Parklands

Initially at St John's, and halfway through my research in Parklands, I came across members of staff whose implementation of safeguarding practices were particularly inflexible and threatened to compromise my research. In the following, I explain how I was helped to re-negotiate access in St John's and Parklands. As explained in Chapter 2, standard safeguarding procedure in most schools entails having a DBS checked, signing in and out of school every day, and wearing a visitor's badge. Safeguarding rules at St John's and Parklands meant I also had to be escorted everywhere I went.

St John's

At St John's, I became the responsibility of Miss Harrison, Mrs Jay's non-teaching assistant to whom she delegated most of the arrangements for my research. I was to learn that, like any other working relationship, there was a natural ebb and flow to field relations (Adler and Adler, 1991, p.173). Initially, Miss Harrison proved a 'stickler' for St John's safeguarding rules. For example, on one occasion I was admonished for not wearing my visitor's badge prominently enough. In addition, Miss Harrison was unyielding about having to escort me everywhere I went. Sometimes, Miss Harrison was delayed or forgot to collect me, leaving me stranded in reception, the sixth form office or outside a classroom where I had been observing a lesson. Once a focus group I had arranged had to be re-arranged because Miss Harrison forgot to collect me from the sixth form office. It had taken a lot of work to get six moderately attaining students, four of whom were not among my student participants, and which included two boys, to agree to meet me. When I did not turn up, the students assumed I had forgotten them. When I eventually managed to re-arrange the focus group, only four girls turned up, including research participants, Amy and Zoe.

When I discovered that Miss Harrison intended to sit in on my interviews with students, I felt that my research, and the confidentiality I promised my students, risked being compromised. After a meeting with Mrs Jay, it was agreed that I would be allowed to conduct student interviews without a chaperone. In turn, I agreed to remain in the sixth form block as much as possible and to keep Miss Harrison informed of my movements. Mrs Jay gave me to understand that she found the safeguarding rules at St John's overly strict and wanted to help me. She told senior management that she was overseeing all my movements with Miss Harrison's help. By the second year of my research, I was able to move around the school relatively freely.

Parklands

Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) describe the tendency of many gatekeepers to treat a researcher as either 'expert' or 'critic' (p.60). Possibly because Parklands' senior

teacher Mr Carr resented or feared my role as a researcher (and a former teacher no longer under his direct control), the security checks to which he insisted I was subjected appeared especially onerous. In addition to office staff undertaking an online DBS check, a copy of my DBS and passport were kept on file and I had to provide contact details which I knew the school already had. The Parklands campus is vast. For someone to collect me every day and to be escorted to observe lessons and other school events was an inconvenience for busy teachers. When Mrs Dawson and former colleague, Mr Cartwright, realised the extent of the restrictions being placed on me they re-negotiated access with Mr Carr on my behalf. It was agreed that all my interviews be held in Mr Cartwright's department so that he could 'keep an eye on me'. Instead of finding someone to escort me around the school, Mr Carr was told by Mrs Dawson that she and Mr Cartwright were being kept informed of my movements beyond Mr Cartwright's department. In reality, this was a very loose arrangement, but it satisfied Mr Carr. The 'bending of the rules' meant I was able to continue my research without any further problems.

My experience at both Parklands and St John's demonstrated that 'different levels of gatekeepers' may come into play at a practical level in ways that are both helpful or obstructive (Rankin, 2016, p.83) and that, as Burgess (1991) warns, negotiating access during research is a continuous process (p.52). Rankin (2016) describes the careful advanced planning for sensitive research which includes the need to identify key gatekeepers and then focus on gaining their support and cooperation (p.83). On reflection, I believe it would have been wise to have approached Mr Carr immediately on his return from sabbatical and discussed my research with him, so that he felt 'in the loop'.

APPENDIX G

Aide memoires for semi structured interview

Aide Memoire - first year 12 interview

(Explain the nature of the research and issues of confidentiality, the right to withdraw from the interview process at any time, and the need for participant to sign consent form. Give copy of information sheet)

1. Tell me a bit about yourself (Who's at home? Does s/he work? Did they go to university?)
2. How did your GCSEs/AS levels go? (Subjects? Grades?)
3. How would you describe yourself as a student? (how school has gone / is going for you? Are you someone who finds school work / exams relatively easy / Works hard for your grades / Aims to get by with 'just enough' work?)
4. Can you tell me a bit your A level subjects – who or what helped you to decide your subjects?
5. Tell me a bit about what you hope to do after school (Do you think you would like go to uni or would you prefer to do something else once you've left school?)
6. Is there anything you'd like to tell me or to ask that we haven't covered?

Aide Memoire - second year 12 interview

1. Tell me a bit about how the year has gone for you.
2. How did you find your AS levels?
3. Tell me a bit about how you found your school's UCAS day/HE Fair/ Career evening.
4. What kind of help and advice for your uni/non-HE choosing would you like, or hope to get, from your school/teachers?
5. Is there anything you'd like to tell me or to ask that we haven't covered?

Aide memoire - Year 13 students

1. Tell me a bit about the support you received when researching your uni /non-HE choices.
 - a. Tell me about who/what has helped you with your **HE choosing**? (e.g. teacher, mum, older sibling? UCAS day or other formal school support? Anyone in the family been to uni? Did you make any university trips?
 - b. Tell me about who helped you to draft your **personal statement**?
 - c. Tell me about who/what has helped you with your **non-HE choosing**? (e.g. teacher or family member? Apprenticeship assembly or any other formal school support? Any opportunity for/have you had any work experience in the area?)
2. Is there anything you'd like to tell me or to ask that we haven't covered?

Thank you very much for speaking to me - and the best of luck!

Aide Memoire for Heads of Sixth Form and 6th form Tutors

(Explain the nature of the research and issues of confidentiality, the right to withdraw from the interview process at any time, and the need for participant to sign consent form. Give copy of information sheet)

For the purposes of our interview, I will use the following terms for different types of universities:

- **‘Elite’ university** - a Russell Group university deemed at ‘top’ end of the Russell Group (Oxbridge, Durham, Imperial)
 - **Other Russell Group** universities (e.g. King’s, LSE, Nottingham, UCL, Warwick)
 - **Less selective ‘good’ universities** - HE institution created during the 1960s expansion of higher education (e.g. Reading, Keele, Essex etc.)
 - **‘New’ universities** post-1992 higher education institutions – former polys, FE colleges, teacher training colleges
1. First, would you tell me a bit about what your sixth form/form group? (prompts: size of sixth form/form group; what proportion of students go to university, what proportion go to an ‘elite’ / ‘new’ university; how does your sixth form compare with others in the area?)
 2. When do your students decide their AS/A levels choices?
 3. Do students get advice with their subject choices?
 4. Tell me a bit about the kind of **formal** help do you/the school give students who aspire to university? (prompts: e.g. what kind of formal / timetabled support do students get? Are students helped to choose their university or do they reach independently? Anything else you can think of e.g. informal support?)
 5. What kind of support do you/the school offer Oxbridge applicants? (do students get access to any ‘specialised’ external support e.g. Sutton Trust courses? Other types of coaching? Oxbridge trips? Anything else you/your sixth form tutors might do to support applications to Oxbridge?)
 6. And what about students who are not ‘Oxbridge’...?
 7. What about students who don’t aspire to university? (Who supports this group? What kind of support do you/the school offer?)
 8. Is there anything you’d like to add that we haven’t covered?

Thank you very much

APPENDIX H

Descriptive and Analytic Codes

Table to show a subset of my codes. This is by no means an exhaustive selection. It includes an example of descriptive and analytic codes that emerged from student transcripts analysed specifically for types of support and/or influences on students' HE choosing or non-HE choosing.

Table 8

Descriptive and Analytic Codes	
Students' HE and non-HE choosing – sources of support / influences on choosing	
Formal	
Open codes	Sensitising concepts
Tutor periods School UCAS preparation days Selective practice Visiting speakers Outreach (Sutton Trust) University websites /literature League tables Apprenticeship websites Apprenticeship assembly/tutor period Careers advice	Institutional habitus, cultural capital; Institutional habitus, cultural capital, formal selection; Institutional habitus; formal selection; Institutional habitus, social capital, cultural capital, formal selection; Hot Knowledge; cold knowledge, formal selection; Cold knowledge; Cold knowledge; Cold knowledge; Hot knowledge, luke warm knowledge; formal selection; Cold knowledge, luke warm knowledge;
Open codes	Sensitising concepts
Family Sister, mother, grandparent (other) Parental education HE graduate/sibling HE student Employment Status in family Familial relationship (e.g. counsellor, practical adviser, intermediary with parents)	Familial habitus; Familial habitus, familial cultural capital; Hot knowledge, luke warm knowledge, familial habitus, cultural capital; Familial habitus, hot knowledge, social capital; Family project/family spirit Familial habitus; Family project/family spirit
Open codes	Sensitising concepts
Staff Head of 6 th form, form tutor, teacher Supportive/unsupportive Knowledgeable / not knowledgeable	Teacher habitus; Teacher habitus; cultural capital, social capital, hot knowledge, luke warm knowledge;

Open codes	Sensitising concepts
Peer group Friends, friends of friends, Social Media (Facebook, The Student Room)	Hot knowledge, luke warm knowledge; Luke warm knowledge;
Other influences Self-evaluation/selection (grades/other ability e.g. drama, music, sport) Cultural/religious/ethnic Cost Locale Nightlife Perceived status/reputation Other institutional factors (facilities) Uncertain /reluctant (about HE) Reactive ('like the website' 'heard it's caring', 'looks friendly')	Cognitive choosing; Social/cultural choosing; emotional choosing; Practical choosing; Lifestyle choice; Lifestyle choice; Career/vocational choosing; Practical choosing; Familial habitus Luke warm knowledge; psychological need;
Response (HE discourse/levels of support)	Conformer, aggrieved, critical, independent, 'passing' non-conformer, rebel non-conformer.

Open coding of interview with Danny - a Parklands non-conforming moderate attainer (see over)

The following is an excerpt of a transcript of a second interview with Parklands moderate attainer, Danny. In his first interview, Danny described himself as a 'maverick' and 'somewhere in the bottom third' of Parklands' high attaining students. In this interview, Danny talked about researching music colleges. The excerpt starts with Danny outlining the entry requirements for the Leeds Conservatoire.

The excerpt has examples of my initial use of colour-coding. I used yellow for 'hot' knowledge', blue for 'cold' knowledge, pink for familial habitus, green for 'teacher habitus' and grey for individual habitus. Initially, I classified Danny and fellow Parklands moderate attainer, Zac, as 'non-conformers' because of their aspirations to study degrees in the creative arts (see Chapters 5 and 6). Parklands' strong academic culture meant that most boys (95%) progressed to Russell Group universities. In addition, around 20% of year 13 boys progressed to Oxbridge each year. Danny and Zac's HE choices in the creative arts made these two boys unusual. However, as my research progressed, I decided to reserve my category of non-conformer to those students who sought an alternative to HE.

Open coding of interview with Danny - a Parklands non-conforming moderate attainer

	3 GCSEs?!
Hot (not cold!)	A-C grade, one of them has to be in English. But obviously that's not really an incentive to not do any work, because they'll ... if... (No fool)
	So it's the Leeds Conservatoire?
	Yeah
	<i>I've never heard of it, I will look it up. That's interesting.</i>
Hot knowledge	They're going for, like, sheer musical talent- yellow! (He knows this - 1st hand?)
	Talent
	They don't really care about much else.
	So, basically, you've got to be literate but really it's about the playing?
	Yeah. And able to, like, communicate in English
Choosing (Researching?)	How did you find out about it?
	Erm ... as in Leeds College of Music? All the conservatoires, er ...
	I mean, do you know someone who's been?
Hot knowledge/ digital social capital	Well I, there was a fair bit of Googling. But I'm also a member of these big Facebook drum forums
	<i>I see! (I'm surprised)</i>
	Um, for buying and selling drums and trading gear, and people talk about stuff and you can ask questions
	<i>I see</i>
	<i>Research</i>
	So you talk about stuff that interests you and you can ask questions.
Teacher habits?	That's great! So, for instance, would Mr D ... would he have known about the Leeds Conservatoire?
	Yeah
Support	Right, so he would help you with your application? Music applications (who?!) choosing/support
Hot knowledge/ Teacher habits	Yeah, he knows, he knows all the scene
	And, is Leeds your first choice? choosing
	I think so, yeah

<p>Self evaluation (pecking order?)</p>	<p>Is that because ... I mean ... no, you tell me ... why Leeds?</p> <p>Well first of all, there's sort of 3 tiers of conservatoires. There's sort of, Royal Academy, Royal College of Music. I wouldn't get in to those two.</p>
<p>Hot knowledge</p>	<p>Because?</p> <p>They're for like the child prodigies, who have, like, you know, been playing drums since they were 2 and are fantastic.</p> <p>I see ...</p> <p>(<i>"BIM" - SEE BRICA!</i>)</p> <p>And then there's the sort of third layer of like Brighton Institute of Modern Music. And I've got friends</p> <p>Brighton Institute of Modern Music?</p>
<p>Self-evaluation Hot? Luke warm?</p>	<p>Yeah, loads, loads of places like that. ... and I've got friends who go there. And they're not as good as I am, and I don't think the teachings very good, and stuff. And Leeds is sort of in the middle. It's got - it doesn't have the big name but it's got some good teaching staff and I've heard really good things about it. And also it's a nice place...</p> <p><i>Pragmatic (Status?)</i></p> <p><i>feelings about locale</i></p> <p>A nice place, great. I know people who live there.</p> <p>And going up North, will be fun</p> <p><i>feelings / opinion</i></p> <p>That appeals?</p>
<p>Feelings (got?)</p>	<p>Yeah</p> <p>You're a bit unusual, aren't you? I don't suppose many Parklands boys choose to go 'oop North'.</p> <p>(laughing) Yeah, true ...but I don't care. It'll be really cheap as well</p> <p>It is, yes.</p>
<p>Pragmatic</p>	<p>Yeah, any uni up North's going to be cheaper</p> <p>You can buy a house up there something like a third of London prices. Rent is cheap.</p>
<p>Pragmatic choosing</p>	<p>My sister - my older sister studies at Southampton, and student rents ...they're really pretty dear.</p> <p><i>South is more expensive</i></p> <p>I think you've got a really good point. Where else is there? Cos there's Leeds, Manchester is also a really great city but they don't do anything?</p>
<p>Family habitats (Sister at uni)</p>	

Research (only just started)	Well, there probably is a Manchester Conservatoire. I don't... I still need to do lots more research in to places to apply
	Yeah. Have you thought of places like Glasgow, as well?
	There's Glasgow, there's Edinburgh, erm ...
	Glasgow's trendier, I guess. Edinburgh is a gorgeous city, though. Yeah... but you're very wise. Leeds would be cheaper, and as you say you get good teaching. So, it's the drummers you're looking at? And they're good for jazz, are they?
careful choosing.	Yeah. Cos I don't want to spend, I don't wanna waste 4 years of my life. Cos these, these 4 years will be the most formative
	Yeah. And on your drumming
Value for money? (choosing) - Status of college matters	Yeah, it's like make or break really. Constant teaching, playing like 8 hours a day - if it's not top tuition it's not gonna be worth it.
	Yeah, it's not worth it. No, you're absolutely right. And are the fees comparable to a University, or do you pay more?
	Yeah, they're the same
Evaluation (academic) competitive	They're the same. OK, great. Now - the other thing about Leeds of course is you don't really need to get all the A levels ...
	No. But I'm still, like ... if they have to choose, there'll be lots of people going for it. So I need that advantage (of A levels)
	I think you're right. I think it shows a place how dedicated you are if you have decent A levels.
	Exactly
	Yeah, I think you're right. I think you've got that idea already. Besides Mr D. Is there anyone else in the school you talk to?
	Not in the school, apart from Mr E. He's-
	Great, tell me about Mr E
Teacher habitus / Hot knowledge	Mr E is Mr D's friend. He who gives me piano lessons. So, they, they're both very similar in that they know the scene, they know about auditions and stuff.
	And is Mr E one of these visiting teachers as well?
	Yeah

Relevant Teacher habitus Relevant to knowledge	<p>No, he's, he's cool. And then there's obviously Mr B but the actual (Parklands) Music staff don't know so much about it cos they did Music academically, just as a subject. So ...</p> <p><i>So the school's music teachers aren't quite where you're at?</i></p> <p>No</p> <p><i>Whereas Mr D and Mr E are kind of they 'get it'</i></p> <p>Because they did it</p> <p><i>Did they ever perform?</i></p> <p>Yeah, they, they're doing exactly what I wanna do. They both gig all the time. They're both performers. <i>Teacher habitus (interesting?)</i></p> <p><i>Performers, and their training was more about performance than academic study, is that right?</i></p> <p>Yeah, right, and Leeds is a performance course</p> <p><i>I see what you mean, that's the difference, which of course would suit you. That's really interesting, how exciting – and you do gig anyway, don't you?</i></p> <p>Yeah</p> <p><i>(General chat about bands and local places Danny plays)</i></p> <p><i>(Bringing interview back on course)</i></p> <p><i>So, what's it like, though, being in a school like Parklands? Where you're so I mean you're not a flautist or violinist playing in that traditional way.</i></p> <p>Erm...no...</p> <p><i>I mean, for instance, I notice your hair (we both laugh – topic of discussion earlier in the day) you've made quite a statement there, haven't you?!</i></p> <p>Yeah. I see what you mean, yeah. But yeah I quite like it. I like that I'm set apart from the whole going to Oxbridge to do Medicine. I quite like the individualistic approach whilst also being academically involved. It, it's like, it's nice. Cos it means that it's quirky and it's different but without being ... it's not like dumb, it's not like I couldn't do anything else so I went and did that. So, I really like it. <i>"quirky" without being "dumb"</i></p> <p><i>So you mean like your drumming isn't because 'I'm stupid and I can't do anything else', it's because you've ...</i></p>
Hot knowledge	
Relevant teacher habitus	
Individual habitus (2 aspects)	

<p>individual habitus Driven</p> <p>Differentiating himself</p> <p>habitus - Self / position</p>	<p>Yeah, exactly.</p> <p><i>SEE 1st interview - not a musical family. wow !!</i></p> <p>Explain that to me a bit.</p> <p>Drumming's like - cos I started playing violin when I was two, cello when I was four. And, erm, I pretty much stopped every other instrument. <u>Drumming was the one instrument that I got into myself, practiced myself, I really want ... and just want to be, like, the best.</u> <i>competitive</i></p> <p>It's the one thing that really motivates you?</p> <p>Yeah, and I like to practise on that.</p> <p>And why do you think it's important to have the academic stuff as well, then?</p> <p>It's important to ... <i>(takes a deep breath...huffs...finding it difficult to explain, a bit embarrassed)</i> <u>I really hate ignorance, it's like a pet passion of mine. Cos I'm ... cos of the groups that I'm in, I'm also part of the big [local town] Metalhead scene. I'm quite a peripheral figure ...</u></p> <p>Yeah, I see.</p> <p><u>Yeah, I see all these people who are really, you know, they're not academically very intelligent...and they're not ...</u></p> <p>Yeah, I get it, they're not academic.</p> <p>And they're not informed. <i>Talented</i> but not informed. So, they're always posting stuff on Facebook, like anti-capitalist, anarchical, and it just, it winds me up so much cos they're like, they don't know what they're talking about. And that's why ...</p> <p>But they might be left of centre and anti-capitalist and be well informed, you know! (laughing)</p> <p>But like, yeah, but that's me. I'm like left of centre. They're the same ideology, but without having the reasons.</p> <p>Right, and you think an education's helped you with that?</p> <p>Yeah, like doing Politics ... <u>Doing Politics has helped me so much, as well.</u> But yeah, these guys get very, very passionate about stuff they don't understand, and say stupid things. And it ...</p> <p>So, you might agree with their points but you feel you've got the arguments for them?</p> <p>Exactly.</p> <p>It's a good point</p>
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<p>Individual habitus (Self / position)</p>	<p>... and it just, and that's why I like this academic side, cos it's like ... (pause) <u>differentiating myself between the two groups here at (Parklands) and then all these people over there</u> (moves between two worlds)</p>
	<p>Yes, so kind of like in two circles. If we had a Venn diagram there'd be Danny crossing/occupying the two circles.</p>
	<p>Yeah, exactly.</p>
	<p>You're not, you don't, do you, see yourself as a 'Parklands type', then?</p>
<p>School habitus ("Bubble")</p>	<p>... er ... (long pause) I don't think, well there isn't like the <u>typical (Parklands) type</u>. But I think like there is a <u>big Parklands type</u>. And I would see myself like encompassed in that.</p>
	<p>Tell me about the bigger Parklands type, then</p>
<p>"Super" type ↓ (super- "Parklands" type)</p>	<p>Well I think Parklands welcomes anyone who's smart and interested in other stuff. So that's why I'd say I'm included. But I'm not in the <u>super typical Parklands type</u>. Like going to do medicine at Oxbridge and always being the best ever. But, yeah, I wouldn't want to be like that.</p> <p>Do you feel in any way, kind of, that people ignore you because you're not the super Parklands type?</p> <p>No, I don't think so. I think its nicer to be quirky.</p> <p>And that's how you see yourself?</p>
	<p>Yeah</p>
	<p>That's interesting. So, would you say – for instance, last week, there was an awful lot ... I mean I don't know how you coped with all the stuff they did for the UCAS preparation day. So what did you do with all that?</p>
	<p>Um, well ... first, I'm not going through UCAS (music college application is different)</p>
	<p>I know.</p>
	<p>So it was all a bit, well, irritating. And ...</p>
	<p>I mean ... do you mind me asking? Did you sit back and look at it objectively, because you're not doing it – or did you just think 'yeah, yeah', and blank off, play with your phone, or something?</p>
<p>Pragmatic</p>	<p>Err... Well, there was two aspects of it. There were some, there were specifics that I was like 'OK, don't need to worry about this'. But there was a lot of good information in there that was just general stuff. Like interviews and stuff. So, I made sure that I was really on the ball with that. Cos they're applicable skills. (No fool!)</p>

APPENDIX I

Table 11

Observational data (informal)			
	Hallingford	St John's	Parklands
Student dress	<p>Boys – informal/casual; mostly ‘street gear’ (hoodies, baggy jeans, expensive trainers, ear-rings)</p> <p>Girls – traditional /religious, casual jeans and tops or ‘sporty’ (hoodies and trainers); little ‘high fashion’</p>	<p>Boys – suit and tie</p> <p>Girls (high attainers) - smart-casual dresses, skirt and tops; some in ‘boho’ (or ‘hippy’) clothing - loose flowing skirts and Doc Marten shoes.</p> <p>Girls (moderate attainers) - high fashion (much care with accessories and bags) or ‘sporty’ (hoodies and trainers)</p>	<p>Suits and ties. Some boys co-ordinate brightly coloured socks with a breast pocket handkerchief.</p>
Staff dress	<p>A mixture of smart and casual. Some dress formally (e.g. men in jacket and tie; female senior management in jackets with skirts/trousers). Some male members of staff casually dressed and unshaven (chinos and fleeces). Most female staff smart-casual; some wear traditional/religious clothing. All sports teachers wear tracksuits.</p>	<p>Smart. Most men in suit and tie. Women in ‘office wear’.</p>	<p>Smart. All men wear jacket and tie, but not necessarily suits. Women in ‘office wear’.</p>

Table 11 (continued)

	Hallingford	St John's	Parklands
Buildings and reception area	<p>Modern architecture comprised of two blocks. Main block includes offices for administration staff and senior management, reception and sixth form. Great pride taken in central social area which doubles as school cafeteria.</p> <p>Reception area features turnstile entrance controlled by reception and staff passes; Female receptionist sits behind glass panel, 'touch screen' sign-in for guests. Hard flooring. Three chairs in corner. Staff list with details of subjects taught and responsibilities on wall above guest chairs. Rolling school news on flat screen TV.</p>	<p>Modern architecture. Separate departmental blocks. Main block includes offices for administration staff and senior management, reception and sixth form.</p> <p>Reception area features a counter with sign-in book and potted plant. Hard flooring. Glass doors to rest of school electronically controlled by receptionist and staff passes. Junior pupils sometimes assist female receptionists. Chairs and a table with copy of the Times and A4 sheets with school news.</p>	<p>Mixture of historic, modern and prefab buildings.</p> <p>Reception in original listed school building, separate from the rest of the school campus. Entrance through original wooden front door with brightly polished brass fittings. Reception carpeted, soft 'comfy' chairs and dark wooden coffee table with three different student magazines and copy of the Times; school honours boards and art work adorn walls. Receptionist sits behind 'antique' style wooden counter with giant flower display changed regularly. Sign in book.</p>

APPENDIX J

Field Note – Dealing with Mr Collins

St John's School - meeting with [Mr Collins] 11.06.14

To discuss my involvement for July UCAS preparation day for year 12 students 10th and

This incident became less and less shocking to me in the telling. I found myself re-telling my account of what follows to fellow research students by way of an extreme example of the ways in which support for sixth formers making their post-school choices could be differentiated in schools. Every time I return to this fieldnote I am struck again by my surprise and frustration. The use of apostrophes and abbreviations suggest my haste to get everything down and accurately conveyed from notes made by hand as I travelled home after a day in St John's.

In our meeting this morning re what he wanted me to do for year 12 UCAS prep day, [Mr Collins] told me he wanted me to do a workshop for Oxbridge students (Grrrrrrr!!). [Mrs Jay] asked for a presentation for *all* the kids on PS writing [personal statement].

No way.

But the point is this: when I asked him what the others would be getting, he said: 'We've got an afternoon with the TA [Territorial Army] for them!' I will never forget it... And he thought this was funny! He gave me a 'what else can you do?' shrug of the shoulders and told me, 'Well, they're only RG students' (!). (No ref to, *no thought* about, kids applying to new unis? Where does this leave them?). I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I ended up saying nothing, at first. I needed to gather my thoughts. (I need to ask [supervisor] about this).

I wanted to look like I understood his thinking, *teacher to teacher* – but I was *horrified*. I could not believe what he was saying. I said something lame along the lines of 'I guess we all find that we let some of them just 'get on with it'...I pretended to go along with him, as if I wasn't stunned by his crazy plan for an afternoon in the playground with the TA. Anyway, he nodded enthusiastically. I think he believed that I was with him with his plan. Actually, I was stalling. I could not think what to say. There is no way I agree with any of this.

Later that day, further thoughts

It's impossible for me to do Oxbridge workshops in light of fact that I want to research kinds of help all kids get with their HE choosing. If I give a workshop to the Oxbridge kids, I'm going to look as if I am complicit in exactly the kind of practices I want to research. I can't be seen (and don't want) to give a workshop for Oxbridge students.

I'm also angry because I travelled in *especially* so that I could arrange the presentation for all year 12s... a 2 hr trek into [St John's]. I feel I've been caught in the middle of something. There seem to be two different ideas about this UCAS day and what my role is to be – [Mr Collins'] idea and [Mrs Jay's] original plan.

Follow up

Compromise. I've emailed [Mr Collins] and offered to do two different sessions. Said I'll run an RG [Russell Group] workshop, with special tips for Oxbridge applications, but want to provide a separate workshop(s) for other students who are applying to HE.

Thankfully, [Mrs Jay's] intervened. My session has been revised. I am now presenting, as originally planned, to *all* year 12s. Someone else is doing the Oxbridge workshop – result!

Popped in to see [elderly friend who lives near St John's]. Her friend, the Rev J was there. We all had a cup of tea together. Rev J used to teach English at [another school in area] which was 'always in special measures'. Rev J. told me St John's 'only cares' about its A* students. She said St John's was 'notorious' for this.

APPENDIX K

Table 13

School documents analysed (detailed)			
School	Hallingford	St John's	Parklands
Noticeboards (Sixth form area)	Main noticeboards display details of students who have accessed Oxbridge and leading Russell Group universities. Other noticeboards give details of other Russell Group successes and of (Distinction*/ Distinction) BTEC students who progressed to selective universities. Also displayed, list of members of staff with their universities. One 'scrap of paper' (year 12 student) advertises an apprenticeship charity. Whiteboard with handwritten advice to 'Stand out from the competition' when writing a personal statement.	Noticeboards outside sixth form office advertises school counselling services and helplines. Any important deadlines (e.g. UCAS) advertised here also. Other notices throughout sixth form area advertise charitable work and/or opportunities. Quotes from the bible feature on selected noticeboards (strategically placed e.g. top of stairs, entrance to classrooms). Sixth form common room has small noticeboard with some HE marketing literature and some student artwork.	Sixth form block noticeboards focus on current affairs (mostly economics). Details of all Oxbridge offers displayed here and in main staff room (Applicant's name, subject and college). Other notices advertising news of old boys' achievements (academic and professional/business) in-school cultural activities, clubs and societies reflecting multi-schools' multi-ethnic population and wide range of extra-curricular activities. Some UK and USA university marketing literature. University league tables. Student artwork line stairs that lead to sixth form area.

Table 13 (continued)

School	Hallingford	St John's	Parklands
Advice, information and guidance literature (HE and non-He choosing) and/or other literature given to students	<p>UCAS day – each student presented with A4 foolscap folder containing timetable of university representatives' talks (morning) and room numbers for form groups for afternoon personal statement workshops, sheets of A4 file papers for note-taking and a biro.</p>	<p>6th form open evening - all guests presented with 6th form brochure and A4 sheets with a timetable of talks and presentations, and list of room numbers for A level subject information. A4 colour coded sheets of information (entry requirements, syllabus description) picked up by guests from displays in individual subject rooms.</p> <p>HE/Careers evening - all guests presented with card folder bearing school crest and school colours containing welcome letter, timetable of talks and list of exhibitors</p> <p>'Life Skills' form period booklets (12, A4 photocopied sheets stapled together) with text boxes, tables etc for students to record target grades, assessments, exam results, details of UCAS or other type of post-school applications and extra-curricular activities. Text broken up with comic cartoon figures at odds with serious tone of some of the advice. Poorly edited, 'flimsy'.</p>	<p>HE Evening - spirally bound 112-page manual containing information on how to make a UCAS application handed out to every year 12 boy (copies for parents available) at start of HE evening. Manual contents (first section): explanation of UCAS application process, advice on how to research courses, list of comparative websites, note of all deadlines; (second section): Separate sections containing 1-2 pages of advice on applying for different degree courses (16 popular courses represented). Each section Includes entrance requirements and ideal subject combinations, advice on personal statement writing and contact details for teachers who act as individual subject specialists /advisers. 'Serious', factual document - minimal use of colour, no images, text boxes or any other textual devices.</p>

Table 13 (continued)

School	Hallingford	St John's	Parklands
School prospectuses	Downloadable pdf from school website. Emphasis on school's high GCSE attainment and citizenship. 'Year 7 Welcome' stresses expectation of progression to university. Photos stress multi-ethnic pupil population, informality and friendliness.	Sixth form school brochure given to guests of 6 th form open evening. Professionally produced. Glossy, full colour, comprising seven thick card pages. Photos of multi-ethnic students engaged in range of social and academic activities. School crest and Christian motto on every page.	School welcome pack in slim white A4 card box with school colours and school crest. Pack contains school brochure (photos of multi-ethnic students engaged in range of academic, cultural & sporting activities), brochure with departmental and extra-curricular information, 'how to apply' booklet, an A4 card with previous year's A level results, and DVD with Headteacher's welcome and short film on life at Parklands. Full colour, high quality (glossy) paper, school crest and motto on cover of every item.
Websites (Front and key pages)	Informal. 'Easy to read' format: use of coloured text boxes, photos of multi-ethnic pupil population & school trips; GCSE statistics.	Formal. Photos of multi-ethnic pupils engaged in academic and cultural life of the school. Christian school motto at top of front page.	Photos of historic main building and gardens; multi-ethnic pupils engaged in academic, sporting and cultural life of school.
Marketing artefacts (collected, given to me or observed being given to guests)	0	0	Cotton book bag, note pad, pen, bottles of wine (red and white), wine bag, tin of sweets – all items branded/labelled with school crest and colours. Hard back 'coffee table' book of school history.

APPENDIX L

Ethical Approval letter



Research Ethics Office
King's College London
Rm 5.2 FWB (Waterloo Bridge Wing)
Stamford Street
London
SE1 9NH

19 May 2014

TO: Nuala Burgess

SUBJECT: Approval of ethics application

Dear Nuala,

REP/13/14-77 - A research project examining the support on offer to sixth formers who aspire to university

I am pleased to inform you that full approval for your project has been granted by the **E&M** Research Ethics Panel. Any specific conditions of approval are laid out at the end of this letter which should be followed in addition to the standard terms and conditions of approval, to be overseen by your Supervisor:

- Ethical approval is granted for a period of **three years** from **19 May 2014**. You will not receive a reminder that your approval is about to lapse so it is your responsibility to apply for an extension prior to the project lapsing if you need one (see below for instructions).
- You should report any untoward events or unforeseen ethical problems arising from the project to the panel Chairman within a week of the occurrence. Information about the panel may be accessed at:
<http://www.kcl.ac.uk/innovation/research/support/ethics/committees/sshl/rep/index.aspx>
- If you wish to change your project or request an extension of approval, please complete the Modification Proforma. A signed hard copy of this should be submitted to the Research Ethics Office, along with an electronic version to crec-lowrisk@kcl.ac.uk. Please be sure to quote your low risk reference number on all correspondence. Details of how to fill a modification request can be found at:

<http://www.kcl.ac.uk/innovation/research/support/ethics/applications/modifications.aspx>
x

- All research should be conducted in accordance with the King's College London *Guidelines on Good Practice in Academic Research* available at:
<http://www.kcl.ac.uk/iop/research/office/help/Assets/good20practice20Sept200920FINAL.pdf>

If you require signed confirmation of your approval please email crec-lowrisk@kcl.ac.uk indicating why it is required and the address you would like it to be sent to.

Please would you also note that we may, for the purposes of audit, contact you from time to time to ascertain the status of your research.

We wish you every success with this work.

We wish you every success with this work.

With best wishes

Annah Whyton

Research Support Assistant

On behalf of

E&M REP Reviewer

APPENDIX M

INFORMATION SHEET FOR SIXTH FORMERS

(You will be give a copy of this information sheet)



REC Reference Number: REP/13/14-77

A research project examining the support provided to sixth formers for their post-school choosing (university or alternatives to university)

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this research project which forms part of for my PhD study. Taking part is entirely voluntary - you are free to change your mind and may withdraw at any time. Before deciding whether or not you would like to take part, please read the following so that you understand why the research is being carried out and what your participation will involve. Please don't hesitate to ask if there is anything you don't understand or if you need more information.

The purpose of this study:

The purpose of my research is to understand how sixth formers make their post-school choices (e.g. university or other post-school destination). am particularly interested to know how schools help students make their post-school decisions and how students are supported with their UCAS or other applications. I hope that my research will lead to recommendations for policy to broaden the range of support offered to all sixth formers, irrespective of their post-school destination. I believe your first-hand knowledge and experiences as a sixth former will be very useful to my research.

What getting involved entails:

If you decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and will be asked to sign a consent form. I will ask you to allow me to interview you at least three times during your sixth form: once in the autumn term and once in the summer term of Year 12, and once in the autumn or spring term of Year 13. Our interviews will last approximately 30-40 minutes. Interviews will be 'semi structured', which means I have some key questions about how you are being helped with your post-school choosing. However, you may use our interviews to raise anything that is important to you, or anything you think relevant to how students in your school are supported when making their post-school choices.

In addition, I may ask you to join focus group discussions with up to five other students, during the summer term of year 12 or early in year 13. The aims of any focus group discussion will be to get students' views about the types of support available for post-school choosing. You are free to contribute in any way to a focus group discussion. Equally you do not have to speak during a focus group discussion if do not want to.

If you are agreeable, there may be other occasions where I may like to have a more informal talk or brief follow-up interview with you or, if you would prefer, to contact you by e-mail. In addition, you are always welcome to get in touch with me if you something has arisen that you consider important about your experiences when applying to university or, when researching an alternative to university, or on any other matter you think relevant or important.

I would be grateful for permission to record our interviews but I will discard all recordings, including those made during focus group discussions, once I have transcribed what was said.

You may *at any time* choose not to take part in any interview or focus group discussion, or withdraw from my research entirely. Unless you instruct me otherwise, should you decide to withdraw and I am in possession of data from interview(s) with you, I will destroy any recordings and any transcriptions. If you have made contribution(s) to a focus group discussion that you later decide you do not want me to use, I will ignore your contributions when I come to write up my research.

Finally, with your and your school's permission, I would like to observe such things as sixth form assemblies, sixth-form form periods and lessons, and any UCAS events and/or UCAS preparation sessions and/or any other sixth form event that arises and which could prove useful for my research.

At all times, I will endeavour to ensure that interviews and focus group discussions are kept confidential. There will be a sign on the door of the room where these take place to advise people not to disturb the proceedings. If and when I am observing other sixth form events, a sign on the door of the venue will inform students and staff research is being conducted.

Confidentiality:

Anything that is said in interview or during a focus group discussion will remain strictly confidential. Your name, the name of the school and anyone else you or any student refers to will be changed when I write up my research.

The UK Data Protection Act 1988 applies to all information gathered in interview and held on either password-locked computers or locked cabinets at King's College London. No data will be accessed by anyone but me, and it will not be possible to

link any data from an interview back to anyone who has participated. You may withdraw your data at any time up to three months after the last interview with me.

Funding of this research

This study is being funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and has been approved by the King's College London Ethics Committee.

What will happen to the results of the study?

I hope to publish my research findings through educational publications and conferences. I will also produce a final report summarising my findings. Please advise me if you would like a copy.

If you have further questions or concerns:

If you have any questions or require more information about this study, please contact me using the following contact details:

e-mail: nuala.burgess@kcl.ac.uk tel: 07900 861130
Department of Education and Professional Studies
King's College London
Franklin Wilkins Building, Waterloo Bridge Wing
Waterloo Road SE1 9NH

If you feel this study has harmed you in way, or if you wish to make complaint about me, or about the conduct of this study, please contact King's College London using the following details for further advice and information:

The Chair
Social Science and Public Policy
Education and Management REP
Research Ethics Subcommittee Chair
e-mail: rec@kcl.ac.uk

(CONSENT FORM FOLLOWS ...)

CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH STUDIES

Please complete this form after you have read the Information Sheet and/or listened to an explanation about the research.



Title of Study: *A research project examining the support provided to sixth formers for their post-school choosing*

King's College Research Ethics Committee Ref: REP/13/14-77

Thank you for considering taking part in this research. The person organising the research must explain the project to you before you agree to take part. If you have any questions arising from the Information Sheet or explanation already given to you, please ask the researcher before you decide whether to join in. You will be given a copy of this Consent Form to keep and refer to at any time.

I confirm that I understand that by ticking each box I am consenting to this element of the study. I understand that it will be assumed that unticked boxes mean that I DO NOT consent to that part of the study. I understand that by not giving consent for any one element I may be deemed ineligible for the study.

**Please tick
or initial**

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet dated REP/13/14 for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information and asked questions which have been answered satisfactorily.

☐

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason. Furthermore, I understand that I will be able to withdraw any data that I have provided up to two months after my last interview or participation in a focus group discussion.

☐

3. I consent to the processing of my personal information for the purposes explained to me. I understand that such information will be handled in accordance with the terms of the UK Data Protection Act 1998.

☐

4. I understand that my information may be subject to review by responsible individuals from the College for monitoring and audit purposes.

☐

5. I understand that confidentiality and anonymity will be maintained and it will not be possible to identify me in any publications.

☐

6. I agree that the researcher may access my academic records for the purposes of this research project.

☐

7. I consent to my interview being audio recorded

☐

Participant's Statement:

I _____

agree that the research project named above has been explained to me to my satisfaction and I agree to take part in the study. I have read both the notes written above and the Information Sheet about the project and understand what the research study involves.

Signed

Date

Investigator's Statement:

I _____

Confirm that I have carefully explained the nature of the proposed research to the participant.

Signed

Date

INFORMATION SHEET FOR HEAD OF SIXTH FORM AND TUTORS

(You will be give a copy of this information sheet)



REC Reference Number: REP/13/14-77

A research project examining the support provided to sixth formers for their post-school choosing (university or alternatives to university)

Heads of Sixth Form and Sixth Form Tutors

I am grateful to you for agreeing to take part in this research project which forms an important of my PhD study. Your participation is entirely voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any time. However, before you decide whether or not you would like to take part, please read the following information so that you understand why the research is being carried out and what your participation will involve. Please do not hesitate to ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

The purpose of this study:

The purpose of my research is to understand how sixth formers who want to go to university or who seek an alternative to university decide their post-school destinations. I am particularly interested to know how schools help students make their post-school decisions and how students are supported with their UCAS or other applications. I hope that my research will lead to recommendations for policy to broaden the range of support offered to all sixth formers, irrespective of their post-school destination. I believe your first-hand knowledge and experience as someone who works directly with sixth formers will offer valuable insight and be very useful to my research.

What getting involved entails:

If you decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and will be asked to sign a consent form. Our interview will be 30-40 minutes long and will be 'semi structured', which means I have some key questions but you may use your answers to raise points you think particularly important or which you feel are particularly relevant. I would be grateful for permission to record our interview but will discard the recording once I have transcribed what was said. I would like to interview you again this time next year and may occasionally ask to you questions on a more informal basis. In addition, I would like to be able to observe sixth form assemblies, some sixth-form form periods, any UCAS preparation sessions and/or HE events, and any other sixth form events which seem relevant to my research. I

will only attend those for which I have been granted permission, and will not attend anything without asking permission from relevant members of staff beforehand.

If and when I am observing sixth form events, a sign on the door of the venue will inform students and staff research is being conducted.

Confidentiality:

Anything that is said in interview will remain strictly confidential. Your name, the name of the school and anyone else you refer to will be changed when I write up my research.

The UK Data Protection Act 1988 applies to all information gathered in interview and held on either password-locked computers or locked cabinets at King's College London. No data will be accessed by anyone but me, and it will not be possible to link any data from an interview back to anyone who has participated. You may withdraw your data at any time up to three months after this/my last interview with you.

Funding of this research

This study is being funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and has been approved by the King's College London Ethics Committee.

What will happen to the results of the study?

I hope to publish my research findings through educational publications and conferences. I will also produce a final report summarising my findings. Please advise me if you would like a copy.

If you have further questions or concerns:

If you have any questions or require more information about this study, please contact me using the following contact details:

e-mail: nuala.burgess@kcl.ac.uk tel: 07900 861130

Department of Education and Professional Studies
King's College London
Franklin Wilkins Building, Waterloo Bridge Wing
Waterloo Road SE1 9NH

If you feel this study has harmed you in way, or if you wish to make complaint about me, or about the conduct of this study, please contact King's College London using the following details for further advice and information:

The Chair
Social Science and Public Policy
Education and Management REP
Research Ethics Subcommittee Chair
e-mail: rec@kcl.ac.uk

(CONSENT FORM FOLLOWS)

CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH STUDIES

Please complete this form after you have read the Information Sheet and/or listened to an explanation about the research.



Title of Study: *Title of Study: A research project examining the support provided to sixth formers for their post-school choosing*

King's College Research Ethics Committee Ref: REP/13/14-77

Thank you for considering taking part in this research. The person organising the research must explain the project to you before you agree to take part. If you have any questions arising from the Information Sheet or explanation already given to you, please ask the researcher before you decide whether to join in. You will be given a copy of this Consent Form to keep and refer to at any time.

**Please tick
or initial**

I confirm that I understand that by ticking each box I am consenting to this element of the study. I understand that it will be assumed that unticked boxes mean that I DO NOT consent to that part of the study. I understand that by not giving consent for any one element I may be deemed ineligible for the study.

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet dated REP/13/14 for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information and asked questions which have been answered satisfactorily. ☐
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason. Furthermore, I understand that I will be able to withdraw any data that I have provided up to two months after my last interview or participation in a focus group discussion. ☐
3. I consent to the processing of my personal information for the purposes explained to me. I understand that such information will be handled in accordance with the terms of the UK Data Protection Act 1998. ☐
4. I understand that my information may be subject to review by responsible individuals from the College for monitoring and audit purposes. ☐
5. I understand that confidentiality and anonymity will be maintained and it will not be possible to identify me in any publications. ☐

6. I consent to my interview being audio recorded.

☐

Participant's Statement:

I _____

project named above has been explained to me to my satisfaction and I agree to take part in the study. I have read both the notes written above and the Information Sheet about the project and understand what the research study involves.

Signed

Date

Investigator's Statement:

I _____

Confirm that I have carefully explained the nature of the proposed research to the participant.

Signed

Date

APPENDIX N

LSE Pathways to Law (Years 12-13)

At the time of Hallingford high attainers, Asmit and Sumeer's attendance of the Sutton Trust's 'Pathways' courses at the LSE, the following information was displayed on the university's website. The page has since been updated.

Pathways to Law

Pathways to Law was set up in 2006 by the Sutton Trust and the College of Law (now the Legal Education Foundation) to widen access to the legal profession. The Pathways scheme delivers a varied programme of lectures, seminars, advice and guidance sessions, skills development workshops and interaction with undergraduate students and professionals through e-mentoring and a legal work placement.

The programme

Students join Pathways to Law in year 12 and continue through to the end of year 13. Students on the programme are invited to attend LSE based academic sessions on legal issues as well as a diverse range of topics including choosing and applying to university, CV and interview techniques, subject-specific revision sessions and workshops on different areas of the law. Students will also visit the Supreme Court, Inner Temple and the Royal Courts of Justice. In addition they will take part in work experience in the legal sector as well as receiving e-mentoring from LSE undergraduate law students.

Eligibility

The LSE Pathways to Law programme has 70 places available to students in London.

Who should apply?

You should consider applying for a place on Pathways to Law if you are in Year 12 and are interested in following a career in law.

To be eligible for the programme you must meet the following criteria:

- Attend, and have always attended, a state-funded, non fee-paying school/college
- Be in Year 12 at the start of the programme
- Have achieved 5 A* – B grades at GCSE (with a minimum of 2 A* or A grades), including grades 9-6 in Mathematics and English
- Live within a reasonable commuting distance of the university to which they are applying

and should meet criteria from at least 3 of the following 4 baskets:

Basket 1

Have been eligible or be in receipt of Free School Meals during secondary school and/or the 16-19 bursary and/or the Pupil Premium

Basket 2

Be the first generation in your family to attend university

Basket 3

Attend a school or college with a low overall A level points score and/or low levels of progression to university

Basket 4

Live in an area with low progression to university and/or live in an area with high levels of socio-economic deprivation

In addition, priority will be given to students who are (or have been) looked after or accommodated in care. Priority will also be given to young carers. Students will be allocated a place at either LSE, University of Roehampton or Queen Mary University of London. Students will not be able to apply to a particular university, although consideration will be given to any preference expressed in the personal statement.

(Pathways to Law, (Years 12-13), LSE Website)

APPENDIX O

Hallingford Russell Group badge



APPENDIX P

Careers Research page from St John's year 13 'Attainment and Aspirations' booklet

Careers Research

Career Aims:

Do you have any career aims already? If so what are they?

Do you know what you have to do to achieve this?

- ♦ AS/A levels/grades required
- ♦ Further Education after school: Degree, HNC, HND, NVQ, other qualifications
- ♦ Do you understand how you must apply for Art courses (it's quite different!)?
- ♦ Employment after school: types of organisation, qualifications (e.g. NVQs) available - Apprenticeships?
- ♦ Work Based experience you need
- ♦ Skills required - what skills do you have/need to develop?
- ♦ Further research needed, e.g. library, etc.

Have you ever seen the school's Career Advisor, ~~Emily Gould~~? What comments/recommendations were made at your interview?

How do you feel about these recommendations? What do you need to do to follow them through?

In the bottom box of the Careers Research table, year 13 students are asked if they have ever seen the school's visiting career's advisor and gives her name (redacted). The final questions 'How do you feel about these recommendations?' and 'What do you need to do to follow them through?' would suggest that it is assumed students will meet with the careers advisor. Only two St John's moderate attainers, Amy and Simon, had been to St John's careers advisor. Both went on the recommendation of Miss Harrison, when they were at a loss about which degree course to choose. Amy found her visit 'helpful' while Simon said that he did not learn anything that he could not find online. In total just three St John's students knew that their school offered the services of a contracted in, part-time Careers Adviser

APPENDIX Q

Typology of student responses to school HE discourses – breakdown by school

A table showing my student typology with a breakdown of student responses to their experiences of their schools' HE discourses and levels of support given for their post-school choosing, by school:

Table 23

Typology of student responses to the school HE discourses – breakdown by school					
Student Type	Description	Attainment Group	Hallingford	St Johns	Parklands
Conformer	Applies to HE. Unquestioning of the HE discourse and uncomplaining about level of support.	High	2 (11%)	5 (31%)	4 (31%)
		Moderate	4 (21%)	0 (0%)	5 (39%)
Critical Conformer	Applies to HE. Questions and has insight into HE discourse and differentiated levels of support.	High	4 (21%)	1 (6%)	0 (0%)
		Moderate	1 (5%)	1 (6%)	0 (0%)

Table 23 (continued)

Student Type	Description	Attainment Group	Hallingford	St Johns	Parklands
Aggrieved Conformer	Applies to HE. Questions HE discourse but without insight. Complains about differentiated levels of support.	Moderate	2 (11%)	3(19%)	3 (23%)
Independent Chooser	Resourceful HE chooser. Researches options without school/parental assistance.	Moderate	1 (5%)	1 (6%)	1 (7%)
Non-Conformer (who ‘passes’)	Chooses an alternative to HE. Completes a UCAS application or claims to be taking a gap year, as if intending to progress to university.	Moderate	2 (11%)	2 (13%)	0 (0%)
Non-Conformer Year 12 Leaver	Does not aspire to HE. Leaves at end of year 12 to pursue an apprenticeship or to go to college.	Moderate	2 (11%)	3 (19%)	0 (0%)
Rebel Non-Conformer	Chooses an alternative to HE. Challenges pressure to apply to HE. Does not pass as an HE applicant.	Moderate	1 (5%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Total			19	16	13